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Author: Gato

Illustrator: Itsuki Mito



Reincarnated as an



APPLE:

This Forbidden Fruit Is Forever
Unblemished!



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Prologue

I apologize for my sudden question, but do you know of the Tree of Life? It may go by other names and have various stories surrounding its nature. Each story portrays it just a little bit differently, and a number of theories swirl around it.

“Hey, do you know about the Tree of Knowledge? Yep, long looong ago, the first humans Adam and Eve were said to have consumed a fruit from that tree! Oh, you knew? It’s such a famous story! They say that fruit was an apple!”

Why did I bring this up, you ask? Well, our journey is finally touching upon one axis of that story.

“This takes me back, Furutsu! Fresa-san and Datil-san are—”

*Whoa there! Wait a sec, Grida! We shouldn’t talk about **that** just yet, I think.*

She giggled. “Whoops! It’s still a secret!”

Yep. What you need to know is that we’ll soon get closer—just a tiny bit closer, really—to discovering the truth of this world, and probably all the other worlds too.

“But your phrasing is too vague. That tells us nothing.”

I know! That’s why we’re here to fill in the details. The events that are about to unfold here can be recorded, and you could even look them up. Of course, you can also just ignore them entirely. I just want you to keep them in the corners of your mind. The events we’re about to experience may not be a beginning, but they are connected to an end.

“Ah, Furutsu! It’s time!”

Yeah, I know. Grida, it’s been a while since you called me “Furutsu,” so it feels a bit different!

“Hey! You asked me to call you that this time, didn’t you?!”

Ack! Pause! Stop!

“Jeez, why do you have to be so weird about this?”

U-Uh, in any case, the events that are about to occur might seem weird, but they’re also really important, okay? All right, later!

Chapter 1: The Girl and the Thieves

Hey, over here! A little lower! Sorry that I'm so small and difficult to see. I'm the apple that just rolled into a huge building through the cracks of the door. In my past life, I was called Daisuke Furutsu, but I was reincarnated into a different world and turned into a fruit. I'm what people call a "nonhuman reincarnator." I get called a lot of names in this world: "Furutsu-san," "Furutsu," "Apple-san," and so on. You can call me whatever you like...except "Dai-chan." That's what my uncle called me and it feels weird.

So why am I in the men's dorms for the Adventurers' Guild? Well, to steal valuables, of course. Hehe, this is what I do best.

"Furutsu! Why do you sound like some master thief?" Grida said.

Hey now, don't make me sound like the bad guy here. This time around, the owner personally requested it. This is charity work! There's nothing in it for me. Wait, hold on. Ever since I reincarnated, I feel like all I've done is help others. Isn't a selfless protagonist kinda cool?

"I get that you're cool, Furutsu. We should explain properly though. We might really get mistaken for thieves!"

Okay, okay. First, I'll introduce my partner. The owner of the cute voice you've been hearing is Grida, and she's in my storage card. Do you wanna say hi?

"Yeah! Um, my name is Grida! I'm a staff made from the World Tree!"

Before I reincarnated, I drew a special "storage card," which gave me access to a special storage space filled with items left by the card's previous owners. That's where I found Grida.

"It seems like every world is supported by its own World Tree."

But two or more different World Trees can't take root in a single world. Should Grida come out of storage, this world and its neighbors would likely get destroyed without a trace—but I wanna get her out of that card anyway.

“Furutsu...”

So I’m stealing stuff to think of a method.

“Furutsu?!”

Y’know, now that I think about it, shouldn’t they just read volume one? Who starts reading a series from the second volume anyways?

“Did you have to say that?! We should try a little harder!”

Ugh, fine. Just a little more then, okay? Uhhh, right, so we’re here to collect Holmer’s belongings. Going on a journey requires a lot of money, and one of his old items, the Dragon’s Tear, might be a key item that would connect us to the World Tree. How’s that?

“There you go! It got a bit sloppy, but I thought it was pretty good.”

I’m honored to receive such high praise from you, milady. All right then, could you lead the way?

She giggled. “Leave it to me! Um, turn right there!”

You’re a big help. Last time I came here, I was inside Fresa’s pouch. You may have been able to see, but I was practically blindfolded.

I rolled down a dimly lit hallway. *Datil used to live in a pretty nice place.*

“Wait, Furutsu! Someone’s coming!”

Whoa, that’s a close one. Who’s wandering the halls in the middle of the night? Oh, it’s a guard. I swiftly rolled out of sight.

“Phew, that was close!”

Yeah. We barely made it. But even if I do get caught, I’m just an apple, so I don’t think I’d raise too much suspicion. Wait, I look super delicious though. Someone might try to eat me, yikes. I should probably not get caught then.

“Furutsu, it’s that door.”

So this is Datil’s old room—the room of the man formerly known as Holmer. All right then, we just need to use that wind magic to cut open a small hole...

“Okay! Will do!”

Hold your horses! I just need to make an opening small enough for me to pass through. Even one percent of your strength could cut this building in two!

“Oh, you’re right! We have to be all secret about how we’re stealing stuff!”

Hey, you’re calling it “stealing” now too? Well, I’ll explain just in case. The guildmaster of this city, Pastèque, had allowed Datil to take Holmer’s belongings as a little bonus. Of course, there’d be no problem if a man went to collect his own things. However, we’ve claimed that Datil is a different person from Holmer. From an outsider’s perspective, it just looks like we’re stealing the late Holmer’s belongings. Since Datil himself asked us to do this, though, this is more of an errand than thievery.

“Huh? Furutsu, someone else is coming. Two people.”

That’s odd. The guildmaster said that he would decrease security around this area.

“Should we put them to sleep?”

No, we can’t use that spell here.

“Huh? Why not?”

We got that spell from demons, meaning if we use it, it’s going to look like some demon snuck into the dorms. People will panic—or at least, that’s what Datil told me. If someone sniffs out signs of human thieves, the guards might simply need to up their security, but if we leave traces of demons, we might be making a big headache for Pastèque. He’s doing us a favor, so we can’t cause a fuss. We should hide again and... Huh?

“Furutsu, look. They’re dressed in all black and look a little different from the guard before.”

Grida, they’re clearly not guards. What security guard hides their face with a mask?

“You’re right! Their faces do look weird! Could they be...?”

Yeah, they’re in the same trade as us.

Grida giggled. “Are you sure you don’t think that you’re a thief?”

Whoops, you’re right. My bad. We should hide for now though.

“Heh heh, is this the room, boss?” one of the masked figures said.

“That’s right. If my info’s correct, this should be that Rank A guy’s old room—Holmer, the one who died in the Chasm of Catastrophe.”

“Hey, don’t the Rank A guys make a lot of money?”

“That’s right. From today onward, we’re rich.”

I didn’t think actual thieves would show up. This is so cliché. Are we sure we’re not being pranked or something? At any rate, though, this is perfect. We can just shift the blame onto these guys.

“Furutsu, you’re evil!” Grida said.

What are you talking about? I’m just here to run an errand. These guys should get punished for being in my way.

“Boss, I knew it! It’s locked real tight!”

“Heh, watch and learn. This is where I shine!”

The duo whispered to each other as they proceeded to pick the lock. I hadn’t planned on opening the door like this from the start, but I figured I might as well let them take care of it.

“Hey, give me the number three and number five picks!”

“Yessir!”

I’d never picked a lock before, but that thin twisted thing the “boss” was using must have been a lockpick.

“Oh, there’s another lock here? No matter, this is like child’s play for me.”

“I knew I could count on you, boss!”

They seemed very experienced. Their mannerisms were cliché and they reeked of side character, but they did actually seem to be pretty good at this. A satisfying clunk echoed through the halls as the lock opened.

“Heh, see? Easy pickings.”

“You’re amazing! I’m with you to the end, boss!” The door quietly opened, and after some delighted whispering, they entered the room.

“Ack, Furutsu! If we don’t hurry, they’ll take everything!” Grida said.

No, that’s fine. Let’s have them take whatever they can.

“Huh? Why?!”

Heh, we’ll let them run and then take everything back. If everything goes well, we might find their base, and we could reap bonus rewards! This little apple’s finally old enough to handle his first errand—these guys have gotta pay!

She laughed. “I think you’re much more evil then!”

No, I’m just here to punish the evil!

“Idiot, close and lock the door!” the boss said.

“Ack! Sorry about that, boss!”

Oh shoot! We should hurry and make our way in! I quietly rolled through the gap.

“That was close!” Grida exclaimed.



Yeah, we just barely made it! Now, let's sit back and watch.

These guys are pretty good. They keep picking out all the valuable stuff and cramming it into that leather bag.

"Wow, they sure are quick!"

They should really use that skill for something more useful. Grida, the moment they leave, could you please collect everything in the room and put it in the storage card?

"Okaaay!"

How convenient. Let's just claim that these guys stole everything. Now, about that hidden safe Datil was talking about...

"Hey, look—a safe."

"Wow, I'm surprised you saw that, boss!"

They're amazing! Did they disengage the difficult traps underneath the floorboards?

"Wait, but Furutsu, shouldn't we stop them?" Grida said.

Yeah. Worst case, we'll get in trouble too. According to Datil, there's even more traps on the safe itself.

"Interesting! What's inside?" the lackey said as he reached for the safe.

Apparently, if someone tried to open it out of order, they'd trigger a shrill alarm alongside an expensive trap. Specifically, you'd activate a bunch of layers of a Restraint Barrier. Any thief would turn pale at this fancy-looking trap.

"I wonder if we'll be okay?" Grida asked.

If those two try to force the safe open, we'll get trapped in that barrier too. We can't just sit back now. Grida, let's hurry and find a way out of here...

"Whoa there! Wait! Don't touch that," the boss said as he placed his hand on the other thief's shoulder. "Something smells fishy here."

"Boss? What smells? It's not me."

“Idiot. No, I mean something’s a bit off here. This could be a trap.”

I’m surprised! He saw through Datil’s expensive trap!

“Look over here, and over there too. They’re small, but these are magic circles. That means...” he paused. “Look, this is bait, and there’s five other hidden traps! Magical traps are a bit of a pain, but they still shouldn’t be a problem for me.”

He proceeded to disarm the traces of traps he found. *Way to go, boss.*

“Okay, I think I’ve disengaged them all. There were even two different types! There must be something really important in this safe.”

The other thief chuckled. “I’m so excited!” He took the safe and slowly opened its doors.

The alarms didn’t sound and the barriers haven’t been activated. This boss is a first-rate thief.

“Whoaaa! Take a look at *this*!” the boss said. Inside were three gold bars and two bags filled with gold coins.

“Wow! Rank A adventurers are rich, boss!”

Whoa! I guess Rank A adventurers really do make a lot of money! It makes it even more impressive that Datil threw all this away to protect me. I’ll have to seriously thank him later. Now, will the boss catch on?

“This is suspicious,” he said.

Thought so. He really is first-rate.

“What’s wrong, boss?”

“This gold is a decoy.”

“Huh?! You mean it’s all fake? But it looks so real...”

No, that’s not it.

“Idiot, that’s legit real gold. It’ll fetch a good price since it’s so pure to boot. Hurry and put that in the bag. Anyway, that’s not what I’m trying to say. This gold was used to hide some kind of greater treasure.”

“Greater treasure?”

I didn't think this guy was that astute. I should be careful or he might sniff out my sweet scent too.

“Look, there's a trap in the back too.” He paused while he reached farther in, before shouting “Wh-What?!” as he took out a rock the size of an apple (or me). As Datil had said, there were two parts to this safe. The rock had come out of a small hidden compartment.

“What's that rock, boss?”

“Hey, I just found something amazing!”

That must be the hidden treasure, the Dragon's Tear, that Datil had risked his life to obtain in the past.

“Furutsu, is that Dragon-san's tear?” Grida asked.

Yep, seems like it.

Every adventurer had a rank. Because Fresa and Datil received their guild cards today, they were Rank E. The Dragon's Tear was one of seven items needed for a Rank A to get promoted to Rank S. Apparently, there were only four Rank S adventurers in the world.

“This is beyond rich. If we sell this, we have enough to buy ten, maybe twenty castles!” the boss said.

“Whaaat?!”

Each of the seven items was legendary. To get the Dragon's Tear, one needed to fight the eponymous dragon—which was deemed to be “natural disaster class,” by the way.

“But why is this rock so expensive?” the underling asked.

“I'll tell you why. Rank A adventurers risk their lives to get seven items: this Dragon's Tear, Devil's Wings, Angel's Feather, Blood of the Phoenix, Fragments of the Red Moon and Blue Moon, and the World Tree's Leaf. They're invaluable treasures that are almost impossible to obtain.”

You're very knowledgeable. Thanks, boss, you saved me from my

explanations. Grida and I had some business with the World Tree, but we didn't have a clue where to find it. That's where the World Tree's Leaf came in. The fact that it's so valuable, and that it's required to become a Rank S adventurer, implied that the World Tree existed and could be reached by humans. If Datil decided to aim for S Rank, then he'd surely try to obtain the leaf as well.

"Furutsu, do you think someone could just grab a lot of the World Tree's leaves?" Grida said.

If you could get a leaf that easily, they wouldn't be using them for Rank S promotions. This Dragon's Tear could only be obtained by fighting a powerful dragon, and it apparently isn't even a guaranteed drop. All seven items are probably extremely difficult to obtain, or can only be obtained one at a time. Wait, you're made out of a young branch from the World Tree, right?

"Yep. What about it?"

Do you think each leaf also has its own personality too?

"Hmmm, I don't know."

Huh. Well, not like I care about the leaves. Datil told me to not force myself, but the Dragon's Tear is an important item for us too. If we don't bring that back, we've failed our errand.

"All right, we've gotten everything that looks valuable," the boss said.

"Yessir, then let's get outta here!"

The two slung the stuffed leather bags on their backs and left the room. They hadn't taken everything valuable, but the remaining stuff was too heavy or big to move easily. The fact that they didn't let their greed get to them also points to their first-rate skills.

All right then, Grida. Let's collect everything else.

"Okaaay!" she said. The moment the two left the room, she collected everything into the storage card. "I'm done."

In an instant, the room was empty. *Great! Let's go outside! If we're late, our perfect crime might fail!*

Grida giggled. "Furutsu, you just called it a 'crime' again, didn't you?"

So this is their base, huh?

"Furutsu, this is..." Grida said.

Yeah. We're at the vacant house across from Fresa's place. The building seemed completely abandoned, but underneath the floorboards was a hidden entrance to the basement. Woohoo! This is pretty exciting!

"Why do you seem so happy?"

Hmmm, maybe it's a guy thing, but I get super excited when stuff like hidden bases is involved. You're a girl, so maybe you're more interested in dolls?

"Dolls?"

Never heard of them? They're toys made in the likeness of humans.

"Hmmm..."

Hm, wait a sec. You're a World Tree, so if we were to make a miniature version in your likeness... Ha ha, it'd be a bonsai! Not sure if you're interested in that.

"Look, Furutsu! The thieves!"

Whoa! I need to roll fast before the door closes. Phew, barely made it! That was a close one!

"Make sure to keep the door closed. It'd only be ironic if we let thieves get in here," the boss said.

"Heh, no kidding," the lackey replied.

Unfortunately for you guys, the irony ship has long since sailed. Hopefully, this tale will end up as some sort of comedy for you in the future. Phew, in any case, this staircase is long.

"Wow, that's amazing!" Grida said with surprise. Her shock was only natural. At the end of the staircase was an oddly large room.

Isn't this a little too grand a base for just two people?

"Furutsu, they aren't alone. Someone else is coming closer!"

Is it their friend? Well, an extra one or two people shouldn't make a—huh?

“Welcome back, sirs!” a voice rang out. To my surprise, a young girl around twelve or thirteen years of age greeted the two thieves.

“Hey, Berry, why are you still up?” the boss asked.

“Because I was worried!” she replied with a smile.

“Hah! We're tough, so there's nothing to worry about.”

“Now go to sleep. You wouldn't want this to affect your health now, would you?” the other thief chimed in.

What's with this situation?

“I'm fine! I want to hear about what you did at work today!” she said.

The boss laughed. “There's no stopping you when you insist, Berry. I'll keep it short though, okay?”

“Yay!”

Wait, are you gonna tell her about your thieving?

“Today's job was to exterminate some vampire wolves that were eating all the livestock at night!”

Huh?

“Vampire wolves?!” Berry said with shock.

“Yep! Not only do they suck livestock blood, but human blood too! They also move around in a pack, so they're real tough to beat!”

The girl listened to the story with a twinkle in her eyes. The boss spun yarns of how they battled the demon as his underling smiled and nodded along.

“Then we defeated the wolf while protecting the livestock!”

It seems like they're keeping their thieving a secret from this Berry girl.

“Wow! Oh gosh! You guys really are strong...” Berry couldn't finish her sentence as she started having a coughing fit. She sank to the ground, wheezing and gasping for air.

“Hey, are you okay?!” the boss cried.

“Berry, you gotta calm down!”

The boss ran over to the girl and started rubbing her back as the underling watched on with worry.

“Hurry, let’s get her to bed!”

The boss took out a bottle of expensive-looking medicine. “Tsk, this is the last of it. We can only pray that it lasts until morning.” He glared at the bottle and gritted his teeth.

Seems like they’ve got their own issues. This is turning more into a tragedy than a comedy.

Perhaps the medicine had done its work; Berry calmed down. She was sleeping peacefully, two rooms away. Based on their conversation, I gleaned that Berry had some kind of incurable disease.

“It’s no good. The medicine isn’t working anymore.”

“But boss, isn’t that the crazy expensive stuff?”

“It’s the best medicine that the best doctor in this city could prepare. One bottle costs thirty gold coins.”

As a side note, thirty gold coins could get someone a pretty decent house.

“We should go to a bigger city and have her looked at by a better doctor! But we need quite a bit of money for that,” he continued.

Isn’t the disease incurable though? Looks like these guys turned to thievery to help Berry.

“Boss, we’ve got the Dragon’s Tear! If we sell that...”

“We don’t have enough time. This is an extremely valuable find—we’re gonna need a lot of time until we find a proper buyer for it.”

Makes sense. It’s treasure that can buy ten to twenty castles. On top of that, they have to hide the fact that it’s stolen. There might not be a lot of takers here.

“Let’s buy as much medicine as we can with the gold we stole today! That should buy us some time until we sell the Dragon’s Tear. Then we can go to the

royal capital and have a good doctor treat her.”

These guys have no intention of using the stolen money for themselves. If I were to change what they said at Holmer’s room from “we’re rich!” to “we can save Berry with this,” I’m left with a completely different impression of them.

“There’s none left.”

“Boss?”

“The medicine we used today was the last bit. There’s no more available for a month.”

The medicine was that precious? No wonder it costs thirty gold coins.

“Besides, Berry’s body is at its breaking point. The medicine can only help so much.”

“No...isn’t there anything we can do?” the underling murmured.

“You idiot. That’s what I want to know.”

The two sighed, their shoulders slumped.

“Furutsu, are these two thieves, but also good people?” Grida asked.

No, Grida. Whatever the reason, it’s not good to steal other people’s things. These guys had been part of a very large band of thieves a few years ago. The other members had kidnapped the sickly Berry, but these two decided to leave the band with her. Ever since, they’d been continuing their thievery to pay for her costly medical expenses.

“We’ll definitely save her, all right?”

“Of course, boss! You got it!”

Stealing things is definitely bad, but I don’t hate these two.

Grida chuckled. “Me neither!”

“In any case, we need to take Berry to a doctor tomorrow,” the boss said.

An incurable disease, huh. These two, like us, have a goal that may be a journey without a destination.

“Oh no, Furutsu! Berry-chan’s turning pale! She looks like she’s suffering!”

Grida cried.

What?! This is bad. Those two don't even seem to notice. I rolled toward Berry's room.

"Berry-chan!"

This is really bad. She's pale as a sheet, and she doesn't even have enough strength to cough. Only her feeble gasps for air echo throughout the room. Looks like my hand is forced here. I don't know if this'll work, but use the water magic, Grida!

"Okay! Break the water's seal, thieves!"

Ding! "Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at two percent." A blue light surrounded Berry as her feeble gasps slowly calmed down.

Seems like we were able to help her a bit, but this clearly doesn't solve the root of the problem. She still looks like she's in pain, and she's still got that little cough.

"Furutsu, is there nothing we can do?"

There's...one way.

"Really?!"

Yeah, I think there is, but...

"Furutsu, please! Save her!"

You're right. A little pain here won't kill me. Okay, here I go! I'll bless you!

Ding Ding! "The transfer ability from the blessing card will be activated. 3...2...1... Preparation complete. Please be consumed."

Ugh, this announcement sucks as always.

"Wait, Furutsu!"

I think this ability will heal her illness, but we've got two problems.

"Isn't that really painful for you, though? I'm so sorry; I didn't mean..."

Yep. First, it's super-duper painful. That's nice of you Grida, but this isn't your fault at all, now is it? Besides, this ability is made for times like this. I hopped

onto the bed and rolled toward Berry's face. I gently touched her cheek, and she looked over at me with a puzzled expression.

"An apple?" She grabbed me, sat up, and cocked her head to one side. "Did they leave this for me?" There's no way she had an appetite, but she also didn't want to ignore the kindness of the two thieves. She took a small bite.

Crunch.

Owwwwwwww! Oh my God! Dear lord!

Roll! Roll! Roll!

"Furutsu?!" Grida said.

Ow ow ow ow! This hurts, my God this hurts!

Roll! Roll! Roll!

See, I didn't think it'd hurt as much this time 'cause her mouth is small. But I was wrong! I'm gonna die! This hurts! Save me, this hurts! Owwwww!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

"Furutsu, hang in there! It's almost over!"

So you see, here's the second problem. Thanks to the effects of the blessing, Berry's now much more inclined to take another bite of me. She'll chase me around, wanting more of me. Ugh, owwwww! My God this hurts!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

"Delicious! More! I want to eat more! More!" Berry said.

See? I knew it! Owww! Owwww!



Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

“Wait, you delicious apple! Just one more bite, please!” Her sickly and frail state vanished as she chased me around her room. I rolled around, escaping her grasp.

Oh shoot, this is bad! Fresa was around to protect me last time, but I’m alone today! She’s gonna catch me! Please don’t eat me!

The door opened, and the boss walked in with a start. “What are you doing, Berry?!”

“Please, calm down! It might affect your health!” the underling said, following closely behind.

The two thieves tried to calm down the rampaging girl. “Let go! I want more! I want to eat more!” Berry shouted.

Ding Ding! “The piece you have transferred has been digested and absorbed.”

Phew! I thought I was gonna die again!

“Thank goodness! Are you okay, Furutsu?” Grida asked.

Yep. The part she bit is all back to normal too. I’m sure her illness will be cured now.

Ding Ding! “Confirmed a parasite negatively affected the recipient of the blessing. This parasite will be forcefully removed. 5...4...3...2...1... Forceful removal completed.”

Berry started groaning. “Ugh...gh...blegh!” She coughed up a gross-looking creature that resembled a squid. Its tentacles wriggled.

Is that a demon?! How did a demon of that size make its way into her tiny body?

Ding Ding! “Warning. Due to the forceful removal, the parasitic creature now has increased aggro toward [Furutsu].”

Seems like the root of Berry’s illness was this gross thing. It flung its tentacles toward me like a whip. *Dude, it seems pissed at me.* Its tentacles expelled some kind of slimy substance, which sizzled when it hit the floor and walls. White

smoke rose in the air.

Oh, that's hot!

Ding Ding! “Detected wound on the outer layer. You have gained three percent resistance against acid. [3/100]”

My Resistant Outer Layer grants me resistance toward any damage I take.

“Furutsu, are you okay?” Grida called out.

Yep. I'll heal wounds like this in an instant.

Fwip! Fwip! The parasite relentlessly attacked, aiming only at me.

It looks slow, but it's actually pretty quick. Ouch, so hot! And it's got great aim to boot. This is kinda tricky.

Ding Ding! “Detected wound on the outer layer. You have gained three percent resistance against acid. [6/100]”

The more resistance I gain, the less pain I feel, and my skin doesn't melt as much—but it's still pretty painful!

Ding Ding! “Detected wound on the outer layer. You have gained three percent resistance against acid. [9/100]”

Ouch! It grazed me again! This is bad. If it gets a good hit on me, my healing won't keep up until I reach a hundred percent resistance! Grida, I'm gonna focus on dodging, so could you cast the wind magic?

“Okay! Unchain the wind, entreat the moon!”

Ding! “Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at three percent.” Grida's spell cut off two of the creature's tentacles as well as part of its body. Her magic was as powerful as ever.

But it doesn't matter how much we cut—it just regenerates right back. Look, that weird foam spurts out from any injuries and then it's back to normal.

“Why did this monster come out of Berry's mouth?!” the boss said, wiping sweat from his brow.

“B-Boss, is that an apple?” the underling said with surprise as he was protecting Berry.

Berry cocked her head to one side with a puzzled look on her face. “Huh? Didn’t you guys leave that apple for me?”

“No? Seriously, what’s with that weird apple?”

Huh? Okay, rude! Don’t call me a weird apple! Don’t mind me, fighting for my life and unleashing a barrage of magic against some mysterious parasite!

Grida giggled. “You put it that way on purpose, didn’t you?”

You bet.

“I think that monster is what made me sick! The mysterious apple helped me chase it out of my body!” Berry said.

“Wh-What?!”

Does she understand that she healed because of the blessing?

“There’s no way...but you’ve got a healthy glow and you’re not coughing at all! Seriously? Are you cured now?” the boss asked.

“Yeah! I’m good as new! In fact, I feel better than ever!”

The boss and his lackey looked at each other. They both took Berry’s hands in their own as large beads of tears rolled down their cheeks.

“This...is a miracle. Thank God...” the boss said, weeping.

“Yes, truly!” the underling added through his sobs.

I’m happy for you guys, but now’s really not the time. This monster keeps healing.

“Furutsu, the tentacles keep coming back! We should use the fire magic,” Grida said.

No, we can’t use that in this small room. Unlike the Chasm of Catastrophe, there’s a lot of flammable stuff in here. We might start a huge fire.

“You’re right. The whole room is made of wood.”

All of these underground rooms are. We’ll definitely cause a fire if we use our magic, but I don’t want to tackle that slimy monster either. Hm? Wait a sec, I know!

“Did you think of something?”

Yeah, leave it to me. Take this! Remove the shackles of fire, traveler, at ten percent strength!

Ding! “Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at ten percent.”

Fwoom!

My large flame enveloped the parasitic demon, and it cried out in pain.

“Wait, Furutsu?! If you fire that...” As expected, the floor, walls, and ceiling all caught on fire.

Ha ha ha! Well yeah, duh.

“Huh?! That apple set this room on fire!” the boss cried.

“Whaaat?! Let’s run, boss!” the underling yelled.

Ha ha ha! Yep, at this rate, I’ll be a burnt apple too!

“Huh? Furutsu, this is a fire! Everything’s burning! What will we do?” Grida said.

I’ll use this: activate Turn Reversal!

Ding! “Turn Reversal has been activated. The effects of the last used spell, ‘Remove the shackles of fire, traveler’ will now reverse. 3...2...1... Completed. Cost: 2118. Recast cooldown: 10,590 seconds.”

“Wh-What’s going on?! There was a sea of flames around me...”

“Boss, am I dreaming?!”

“Look! That monster’s not on fire anymore! Is it back to normal?!”

Thanks to Turn Reversal, all the burned objects returned to normal. It had reversed all the effects of my fire spell. Of course, the parasitic demon also returned to its original uncharred state.

“It...isn’t moving?” the boss said.

I can’t revive a life that’s been lost, so here’s an unscathed corpse instead.

“Wow! I forgot all about that! You’re amazing!” Grida said.

Heh, I am, aren't I? I'm a genius! Grida, could you collect it, just in case?

"Okay! Here we go!" The creature slowly disappeared inside of me.

"Eek?! Boss, the apple ate that thing!" the underling yelped.

"Idiot, the apple didn't eat it. It just gathered it up or made it disappear somehow. Have you never seen spatial magic?"

Way to go, you're really knowledgeable.

"Huh... I've heard about it before, but can an apple use that kind of high-class magic?"

"This clearly isn't a normal apple. It healed Berry and it did whatever made all that fire disappear. It's got some godlike abilities."

Awww, you're praising me too much, boss! You're making me blush!

"It probably understands our words, and also knows about all the bad things we've been up to as well..."

Well, I don't know everything, but to a certain degree, yeah. On the other hand, I also know about what you did for Berry.

"Huh? What do you mean by bad things?" Berry asked, looking at the two men with a confused expression.

"My name is Júzi," the boss said.

"And I'm Arguta! Pleased to meet ya!" the underling said. They both ignored Berry's troubled stare as they bowed deeply toward me.

"I believe you aren't a normal apple, so I have a request. It might be weird that I'm saying this to an apple, but we're going to atone for our sins," Júzi said.

Atone for your sins?

"We decided this from the start. We only stole from evil rich families or from dead adventurers that didn't leave families behind, but a crime is a crime nonetheless. We planned to turn ourselves in when Berry recovered."

Oh, so you really are just good people. After everything that's happened, I feel like no one sees you guys as evil.

“If we’re caught, the best case scenario is that we hang. So if you can find it in your heart to grant our request, I ask you to please take Berry back to her hometown.” Júzi smiled gently with a hint of sadness as he patted Berry’s head.

“So the day’s finally come, eh, Boss? I’m prepared for it though,” Arguta said.

“Huh? What are you both talking about?” Berry asked as she stared into their faces. They each wore a happy yet lonely expression.

“Furutsu, I feel really bad for them,” Grida said.

Grida, I’m gonna take everything in their base.

There was a pause. “Huh?”

Let’s start with this room. Please collect every single thing they have!

“But why? Why should we do such a horrible thing?!”

Because then Júzi and Arguta can wait for the medicine in this city, with their heads held high.

“Huh?!”

It’s not as if they’re well-known in this city. They’re able to walk around in public with their faces exposed, after all. If that’s the case, if they stop their thieving right now, they can live normal lives, punishment-free.

“Furutsu!”

So we’ll take everything they’ve got, their crimes included. Will you do the honors?

Grida laughed. “Roger!”

I rolled into every room I could and emptied them out. As I thought, anything of value seemed to have already been used for Berry’s medical expenses. Júzi, Arguta, and Berry could only stare in surprise at my audacity.

“Furutsu, I think we’re done!”

Okay then! Thank you, Grida.

“This apple stole everything we have...” Júzi said.

“Boss? What does this mean?” Arguta asked.

“Why did that apple...?” Berry mumbled.

*You three seem to be confused. Grida, could you please take out **that** item?*

“Okay!” she replied.

A fair distance away from the trio, I produced some odd-looking instruments with a clink—the lockpicks.

“Th-Those are my...” Júzi stammered.

Targeting all picks from numbers one to fifteen. It’s dangerous, so stay back, okay? Strength at one percent. Unchain the wind, entreat the moon!

With a slashing sound, my wind blade sliced every pick in two. I even accidentally cut into the floor a little.

“Eek! Wh-What’s it doing?!” Arguta yelped.

“Eek?!” Berry cried.

Whoops, I guess that was a bit too powerful. I didn’t mean to startle you guys.

“Furutsu, do you think they’ll understand?” Grida said.

Yeah. At the very least, I’m sure Júzi will.

There was a brief silence. “Thank you. I owe you one,” he said.

See?

“Boss? What are you talking about?!”

Yep, that’s the Arguta I know.

“Heh, you idiot. This apple took all of our dirty money and even destroyed my picks to boot. It’s trying to tell us that it’ll let everything go, and that we should look into a career change.”

That’s exactly right, Júzi. You get me. You’re still hiding the fact that you were thieves from Berry.

“Oh, I get it now!” Arguta said, as he seemed to have an aha moment.

He’s so cliché that he reminds me of the thieves you’d see in old-school cartoons.

“Huh? Switch jobs? You guys are going to quit being security guards?” Berry asked.

*Pffft? You guys said you were **security guards**?! You sure love irony, Júzi.*

“Yep, our work ends today. Maybe we should become travelers or something,” Júzi replied.

“You’re right! Then we should aim for Berry’s hometown, Muruma!” Arguta said.

I see. Muruma, huh? I’ll keep that in mind.

“I...can go home?” Berry stared at the two thieves, a look of surprise on her face.

“Muruma is quite a ways away. We wouldn’t have been able to move you that far before, but it looks like you’ll be okay now,” Júzi said.

“Guess we should get packing!” Arguta said.

Well, if you’re going on a journey, you’re gonna need some stuff. Details can be found at the end of the first volume.

“You’re exactly right, Furutsu! Hup!” Grida said. A small leather bag appeared in front of the group with a clank.

“Hey, apple. This isn’t fair, y’know?” Júzi said.

Aw, come on, don’t say that. You didn’t steal this—it’s a present from my best friend to you. Grida had taken out a bag filled with the gold coins that Júzi and Arguta had stolen from Holmer’s room. *I’ll roll around and apologize to Datil later.*

“This is fantastic! We can get moving right away!” Arguta said.

“No, Berry just recovered. We should rest a little.”

“I’m fine! See, look!” Berry suddenly did a handstand and started walking around on her palms.

Hey, were you always this energetic?! Stop that! You’re wearing a skirt! We can’t show something like this!

Júzi laughed. “You’re really so spunky, Berry! I’ve never been happier!”

Arguta agreed. "This really is great!"

With huge smiles on their faces, they both looked teary-eyed at Berry, as though they were looking at their own daughter.

I'm kinda relieved in all sorts of ways.

"This is amazing! You were so frail mere moments ago!" Arguta said.

"Yeah, it's hard to believe," Júzi added.

Of course she's energetic. Though it was for just a moment, thanks to the blessing card, Berry was the second-healthiest person in the world. The healthiest, of course, being myself.

"Apple, we'll head out tonight. I'll never forget your kindness," Júzi said.

Sure! It's better to leave at night, when there aren't a lot of people around. Take care!

"Boss Apple! Thank you for everything!" Arguta said.

Boss? I kinda like that.

"Apple-chan, thank you so much! I hope we can meet again!" Berry said.

Yeah, see you around! I'm glad you're feeling so much better, but don't wave while you're doing a handstand. You might get hurt!

We arrived back at Fresa's lodging. It's a big help that this place has a cat flap, but I do get chased around if I let my guard down.

"Welcome back, Apple-san," Datil said. "Took you a while. We were worried that you might've gotten caught."

"Ack, let go! See? Now they're back already!" Fresa whined.

Hey, Datil? Why do you have her in a nelson hold?

"You look puzzled, so allow me to explain," Datil said. "Remember when I said that we should keep this a secret from Fresa-san?"

Yeah, you did say something like that. I wasn't too bothered by it though.

"Well, Fresa-san here goes gaga over thieves. Had she found out that you

were going to sneak into Holmer's room, she would've definitely tagged along. And well, she found out, and now we're here."

"Datil! I'm fine now! Let gooo!" Fresa wailed.

So that's why she's dressed up like that.

Grida giggled. "She's dressed in black from head to toe! Just like the other two thieves!"

She even got a mask. I'm glad she didn't tag along—I feel like things would've gotten more complicated.

"Now then. We'll leave tomorrow, so I suggest we go over our plans," Datil said. We'd decided to leave the city tomorrow, as it didn't seem wise to stay long in a city that Holmer was well-known in. "I don't really mind where we go."

"Let's see. We don't really need to go anywhere either," Fresa added.

She was changing from her black costume back into Perkunas's Mantle. Datil continued while looking away. "Apple-san, do you have a place you'd like to go?"

Hmmm, let me think... Oh, didn't we pick up a map or something when we were clearing out that base? Grida, could you please?

"Hmmm, a map... Let's see... Map, map, map, found it!" she said. The map she produced was large enough to spill over the edges of the round table.

"Oh? This map covers quite a bit of land. You've got some good stuff, Apple-san," Datil said.

Heh, it's just something I stole. Don't worry about it.

"Ah, there's a red circle on our location, the city of Kalabuya. Hm? There's another red circle way north. Muruma? That's pretty far. Why is this marked?"

Because it's Berry's hometown. Oh yeah, we should also show them that parasitic creature.

"Could I take it out, Furutsu?" Grida asked.

Yes please. Wait, maybe it's a bit too big?

"Whoa, what is this?!" Datil yelped.

“Ewww! Gross!” Fresa cried.

We plopped the thing in front of them. It made a squelching sound as it landed.

“Apple-san, did you get involved in something crazy again?” Fresa asked.

Correct! Nice job, Fresa!

“Hey! Whoa there! This is bad, Apple-san! Isn’t this a siratar?” Datil said, his face turning pale.

I see. So this demon’s called a siratar. And why is this bad?

“Where was this? Did you defeat this?!”

Yeah, it was pretty tough! I rolled around Datil.

“Don’t you roll at me! This demon’s pretty dangerous, you know? I’m sure you were able to defeat it because you’re strong.”

Really? I mean, it was tough, but it wasn’t as bad as that queen ant.

“This siratar is a parasitic demon that latches onto people. I’m sure you know that though.”

Yep, I just saw it.

“If it got this big, you must’ve forcibly dragged it out from the person, correct? And that person is also probably still alive. Am I right?”

Bingo. You saw right through me, Datil. Your phrasing makes it sound like there’s a high death rate for the host.

“You see, once a siratar chooses its host, even if it’s discovered in its very early stages, there’s no way for that host to survive.”

Seriously? I didn’t know it was that bad. I thought a parasite would want the host to live as long as possible so that it could sap more nutrients.

“You seem confused. You see, this demon turns into its host.”

What do you mean?

“A siratar doesn’t just absorb nutrients. It also consumes its host’s organs, flesh, and blood. Once it does so, it slowly mimics the parts it consumes.”

What?! So it's that big because it had already eaten parts of her? It's practically as big as she is! So I regenerated nearly her whole body and forcibly dragged this thing out? Man, the blessing card's OP!

"The worst part is that the siratar eats the host's brain, consumes its knowledge, and starts to live a normal life in place of its host."

So it slowly eats the host and takes its place. At its final stages, it's practically just a demon wearing a human suit?

"Datil? If it absorbs all your knowledge too, even your family members wouldn't notice that it's a siratar, right?" Fresa said.

"Exactly. They're also hermaphrodites. Once a siratar absorbs its host's brain, it can continue to lay its eggs without anyone noticing."

So it'll start to find more hosts in its surroundings?! With its host's memories, it can continue to find new hosts in its surroundings as more clueless people fall victim. No wonder he turned pale when he saw it.

"If the siratar is this large, it was probably just about to consume its host's brain."

You might be right—that was a close one. If it got to her brain, I doubt even the blessing card could work its magic. Hm, hold on. So a siratar needs to become a human to lay its parasitic eggs in its surroundings, right? Where did Berry get that egg laid on her?

"Apple-san, could it be that this red circle on Muruma has something to do with the siratar?" Fresa asked.

Honestly, your epiphanies in these kinds of situations are amazing. I might be overthinking this, but when Berry was kidnapped, she might've already had a siratar egg inside of her. If that's the case, there's a good chance that something awful is going on in Muruma. I rolled around Fresa. If it turns out I'm wrong, I'll be more than happy to admit it. But if I'm correct, those three are in a lot of danger!

"Datil, seems like we've got our destination," Fresa said with a big smile.

"Apple-san, you really get yourself involved in far too much," Datil said with a

forced smile.

Sorry, you guys. I just really don't want to let those three die.

"You're leaving already? Shame, but I suppose that's the way it is," Pastèque said. We had decided to visit him one last time before we left. "Ah, yes, go ahead and take that big thing in the other room."

We opened the door to the other room as instructed, only to find the corpse of the baby dragon that Fresa had defeated yesterday.

"Are you sure? This is quite the monster," Datil said.

Pastèque laughed. "I can't be called an adventurer if I steal another person's thunder! Of course, I've added this to your adventurer evaluations as well." He glanced over at Fresa, then turned to Datil. "Do you have a place to go? Right now, the weather's good in both the north and the south. Great for sightseeing. The fishing town in the south can lead you to some great food that pairs great with liquor!"

"I'm so sorry, sir. There's actually something I'd like for you to see. Apple-san, would you please?"

Copy that. Grida, could you collect the baby dragon and take out the siratar?

"Okay! Here I go!" she said. The baby dragon disappeared into the storage card, and the siratar took its place.

"Huh?! Is this a siratar? It's quite big," Pastèque said. Like Datil before him, the guildmaster's expression changed as he continued to intensely stare at the corpse. "But if it's this big, wouldn't it still retain its human form even if it's slain? How did you remove the demon by itself?"

"Sir, I believe the host is still alive," Datil replied.

In normal circumstances, that should be impossible. After all, it got this big from eating her.

"Impossible! That's unheard of!" Pastèque was silent for a moment before speaking again. "Ah. This also has something to do with your youth, doesn't it?" He glanced over at me, as Fresa cupped me in her hands. He seemed to have

understood something.

Hey, how much did this guy figure out from yesterday's sword fight?

"Since you showed me this, I assume you already have a destination in mind?"

"Correct. We're heading to Muruma," Datil said.

"Muruma. Noted. I'll have some people do some investigating. It won't be too elaborate though, since I don't want to explain who I'm doing this for."

I see. If he says that there might be siratars in Muruma, people will start to ask how he knows.

"And? What's the probability that someone from here in Kalabuya is infected?"

Júzi and Arguta said that they took the sickly Berry and fled from that band of thieves. That means that Berry was already infected with the siratar before she got here. I hopped onto the floor and rolled from side to side. This was my signal for "no."

"Seems like we don't have to worry about that," Datil replied.

The guildmaster looked at Datil and me, and burst into laughter. *Why does he look kinda happy?*

"Hah! I see, I see. Well, that's good news. Then I'll arrange it so that you can get some intel about Muruma and its surroundings. As for the code, hm... If someone asks you 'Why did you go south?' you should answer, 'Because I don't drink alcohol.' Also, take that disgusting slimy demon with you, you hear? Like I said, I can't be called an adventurer if I steal another person's thunder."

So this is the store that casts antidegradation magic on equipment, huh? As we opened the door, we found the shop owner, an elderly man, smiling at us.

"Welcome. I've heard all about your weapon. Now please take your sword out."

This was the "store with a good magician" that Pastèque referred us to. Datil took his sword from his waist and handed it to the shop owner, scabbard and

all.

“Oho! As he said, this is quite an interesting sword. All right then, I’ll restore all eight layers of magic. Hm? Do you want me to do the same to your armor as well?”

“Oh, no need. This armor is—”

The owner laughed. “No need to be so reserved! It’s on *his* dime, after all. Why not let me restore the magic there too?” The moment the owner reached out and touched Datil’s armor, he started trembling. “Th-This is...”

That’s Loga’s Leather Armor. It’s made out of the skin of a demon lord from another world. It’s a god-tier item and is self-repairing. So there’s no need to apply antidegradation magic—it doesn’t degrade in the first place.

“I can’t believe this. Wh-Where did you get this terrifying armor?”

To think he saw this armor’s true value in an instant! Pastèque has a good eye for shops.

“As I said, no need.” Datil smiled and put his finger in front of his lips. “I’m sure you’ve heard from the guildmaster, but I’ve got some stuff going on, so if you wouldn’t mind...”

The owner’s face twitched with surprise and he let out a small yelp as he took Datil’s sword and disappeared into the back of the shop.

It might be better if we don’t show off our SSR items.

Many black-robed people walked down the main street carrying a countless number of coffins.

I guess funerals are the same in any world.

“Huh. To think I’d attend my own funeral procession,” Datil said.

You had to throw away your Rank A title because I made you young again. I’m really sorry about that.

“Hey now, Apple-san. You don’t have to look that apologetic. I’m actually kind of having fun. Besides, I feel super lucky to be young again.”

Well, that makes me feel better. It seems you're understanding my thoughts as well, slowly but surely. I'm an apple, guys. Why do you two understand me?

Fresa giggled. "Apple-san, you don't have a face and you don't talk, but I can tell when you're deep in thought or having fun. You're just like a person, aren't you?"

Well, for whatever reason, Fresa understood me from the start. I wonder if we can get some sort of telepathic communication going?

"Huh? I kind of don't want that," Grida said.

Oh? Why's that?

"Because I want to be the only one who can talk to you! That should be enough."

Ha ha ha! So you want to monopolize me? How cute. But reality isn't so forgiving. If we can't communicate while fighting, we're at an extreme disadvantage.

"Well, yeah, but..."

This is pretty difficult though. I can try writing words by manipulating my cells, but I can only write in Japanese—they wouldn't understand a thing. I could try drawing simple pictures like arrows and stuff, but that doesn't quite get my thoughts across either. It's impossible for me to talk out loud too, right?

"I've never seen a plant talk either."

Right. I guess I can at least communicate a little bit via rolling.

"Well, I've sent myself off, so I can travel without any regrets!" Datil said. As he'd witnessed Holmer's funeral, Datil had now thrown away his past self. As of today, Holmer was officially dead.

"All right theeen! Let's go, you two!" Fresa said.

Yeah! Right now, we should focus on catching up to the three headed toward Muruma!

Grida giggled. "An adventure! I'm going on an adventure with you, Furutsu! I'm so happy!"

I am too, Grida.

“Apple-san, the next city’s close by and there aren’t many monsters along the way, so we’re walking,” Datil said. According to him, there was a horse carriage station we could use in the neighboring city of Nasamma.

“It’ll take maybe half a day on foot. There’s always adventurers on this road, so demons don’t come close. They might get killed, after all,” Fresa added.

Júzi, Arguta, and Berry left for there in the middle of the night. We should be fine.

“Fresa-san, there shouldn’t be a lot of monsters, but we should still be careful just in case,” Datil said, looking at her with a tired expression.

“We’re fiiine, Datil! There aren’t many demons that can beat us anyways!” Fresa was practically bouncing with excitement as she walked.

“Now, that’s not what an adventurer should say. If it strikes in the right place, even a small rock could kill the most powerful man in the world. That’s how we humans are. If we let our guard down, it might have devastating consequences.”

“Okay, okay! I get it. I’ll be careful!”

That’s true. No one knows how a human might die. Even in a peaceful country like Japan, there are humans that get killed by apples.

“All right. Could you please take out your guild card? We can’t leave the city until we show these to the city guards,” Datil said.

The city was surrounded by walls to prevent the demons from invading. There was always someone guarding the city gates, and any person going in or out needed some form of identification.

“I know! Jeez, you’re so annoying!” Fresa said. She puffed her cheeks in anger as Datil gave her a forced smile.

They showed their guild cards to the city guard. “Fresa-san, and...Datil-san. You may pass. Stay safe!”

I’m worried about Berry and the other two, but honestly, this is pretty exciting!

It had been around an hour since we'd left Kalabuya, and we passed by a constant stream of people as we walked. Among others, we saw a super muscular man, a parent and child, an elderly couple, and a knight in shining armor. This wasn't really an ideal place for a monster to wander about after all.

"Hey, Datil. What have you been reading?" Fresa asked.

"Oh, this is a document from Pastèque-san that explains some details about siratars. I also received some info about some of Muruma's neighbors. I'm reading up on those."

Neither Datil nor Pastèque are just musclebrains.

"It seems the siratar doesn't really leave its host's area of activity. For example, if the host was a baker, it'd stay as a baker, and if the host was a knight, it'd continue to act like a knight. Even if a village was completely overrun by these parasites, at a glance, it'd just look like a normal peaceful village," Datil said.

"Really? So there isn't a chance that they'd go outside of the village?"

That's probably not the case, Fresa.

"Well, it might not be as easy for them to spread outside the village—like with diseases and other demons—but if one's host was an adventurer or merchant, they would most likely travel around frequently. There's no guarantee that the siratars are contained in one area."

In other words, there could be siratars acting like adventurers or merchants, using Muruma as their base as they travel across the world.

"Our one ray of hope is written, uh...here. Please take a look. In Muruma, there isn't an Adventurers' Guild or any large businesses. There aren't that many adventurers and it's mainly an agricultural village. This means that there won't be that many merchants either."

I see. So we might not be too late. But there's another problem, isn't there, Datil?

"There may not be many people leaving the village, but there are some who

enter.”

Tourists and clueless visitors are probably perfect targets. They could be secretly implanted while they’re being welcomed to town, and would leave the village as new hosts.

“Then we should hurry, shouldn’t we?” Fresa said.

“Yes. This could spread throughout the world.”

Initially, I had thought both Datil and Pastèque were overreacting, but I’ve come to think that I’ve been a bit too naive. Worst case, all of humanity could perish.

“Off topic, but I’m totally not tired at all. Is this thanks to you, Apple-san?” Fresa asked.

Yeah, probably. Thanks to the curse card, both of your physical capabilities have increased immensely. We’ve been walking nonstop, but it looks like you guys aren’t tired at all.



“Hmmm, perhaps we don’t even need a horse carriage, then?” Datil said.

“Huuuh? What are you talking about?! Walking takes too much time!”

To get to Muruma, we first need to ride the carriage to its last stop, then walk from there. If everything goes smoothly, we should get there in about five days.

“I’m just kidding. Muruma’s quite a ways away.”

In general, horse-drawn carriages also apparently came with a capable bodyguard. There were, of course, adventurers who chose to walk the entire way, but we didn’t have the time for that. If there were any monsters that were faster than our carriage, the bodyguard would take care of them, but if there was any trouble, we could just defeat them quickly ourselves.

Oh, I think I see it! Is that Nasamma?

“All right. Could you please take out your guild card? We can’t enter the city until we show these to the guards,” Datil said.

“Hey, Datil! Are you doing this on purpose?! I know already!”

You guys really get along well.

Chapter 2: Journey on a Horse-drawn Carriage

Nasamma had a different kind of energy than Kalabuya.

*It truly is a city that's like a huge carriage station. You can see all sorts of different species, and there's so many different kinds of people around too. Whoaaa! Look, a girl with cat ears, and another with dog ears! So they **do** exist here!*

"Furutsu, do you like those kinds of ears?" Grida said.

*Hm? Well, if you were to ask me whether I like or dislike them, the answer is that I **love** them. Wow! Fox ears too! That tail looks so soft and fluffy!*

"You cheater."

Look! I found elephant ears! Huh? Did you say something?

"Nope."

I see. I just felt another chill up my spine. Haven't had one of those in a while. Maybe I'm just imagining things.

"Apple-san, what are you looking that excited for?" Datil said. "Can you see it? That's the stagecoach station."

"I hope there's one that's heading north," Fresa said.

There were a bunch of carriages lined up in a stone-tiled plaza. *Wow, there's so many!*

"Found one! Oh, wait, it says they can only go to the next town north. Awww..." Fresa whined.

That's no good. There's no guarantee we'll find a carriage heading north in the next town. Also, layovers are a pain.

"This one might be good!" Datil paused. "Ah, nope, it's leaving in three days."

If we wait for three days, Berry and the others might get consumed. Oh, how about this one? I went to a huge carriage with four horses that had a plate

stating “going north.”

“Good one, Apple-san!” Datil said. “Huh, are they about to leave?” He rushed over to the coachman.

“Sure, okay by me. You bunch will leave our carriage nice and full, so that’s a win-win in my book,” the coachman said.

Phew, we got a ride. Datil and Fresa showed the coachman their guild cards. *So we need identification for stuff like this too?*

“Looks mighty fine to me. I sure will feel better if you adventurers are along for the trip!” The coachman smiled at us.

Great, he seems nice!

“Hey there, hurry up and get in! Don’t dawdle, you low-rank losers!” a voice rang out.

“You guys sure are taking it easy! Where are you Rank E kids going, anyway? You brats are such a pain!” said another.

Two adventurers, who were most likely our bodyguards, started mocking us.

“Heh heh, I’m Rank C, so I’m your senior! I’ll let you rub my shoulders later, little lady!”

The other bodyguard burst into laughter. “I’m sure this’ll be a great learning experience for you guys! Just sit back and watch!”

Great, they sure do seem nice... I guess this’ll be a fun journey.

“Datil, why does your guild card have a red line?” Fresa asked. The carriage clattered along. In the driver’s seat were the coachman and the two Rank C adventurers.

“Huh, where?” Datil said. The back of the wagon where we were sitting was covered, and there were a total of ten passengers, including us.

A man wearing a robe, an old person and their grandchild, a young couple, a duo that look like adventurers, and a man with a large bag who looks like a merchant. Everyone’s different.

“See, on the edge right here. This straight line that looks like someone used a ruler to draw it.”

The only part of this that I didn't daydream about is the peacefulness. We haven't met any demons so far.

“Oh, you're right. I wonder what this is?”

“As the enemy attacks us, we struggle onward and fight for our lives. One after another, the passengers fall victim to the enemy.” That's kinda what I had in mind.

“So even you don't know what it's for? It doesn't seem like a stain or anything.”

Ugh, I'm so bored! Come on, just a little excitement, please!

“Apple-san, you seem bored. I bet you're thinking that you wish we were under attack or something, aren't you?”

H-Huh?! N-No! There's no way I'd think that, Datil!

Fresa chuckled. “I guess he hit the nail on the head, didn't he?”

I love peace! Yep! I hope nothing happens at all! Eheh... Ha ha!

“You're funny, Furutsu!” Grida said.

No! No no no, that's not it. Grida, trust me, I'm praying for safety from the bottom of my heart.

“I was right, wasn't I?!” Datil said.

“You're reeeally easy to read. We're gonna get in a fight sooner or later, right?” Fresa said.

Why can you guys understand what I'm thinking?! I'm just an apple, aren't I?

“Shut up back there!” one bodyguard yelled.

“If you guys don't keep it down, we won't save you!” the other barked.

Seems like those two Rank C dudes got annoyed by Fresa and Datil's conversation.

“Furutsu, they don't seem very strong,” Grida said.

Listen well, Grida. You can't judge a book by its cover. These bodyguards might be amazing people.

"Huh, really?!"

Both Datil and Fresa are Rank E. According to these Rank C adventurers, we're lower than them. What's more, these kind folks said they'd protect weaklings like us. We should do as they say then, shouldn't we? Besides, it'll be funnier later.

"My deepest apologies! We'll stay quiet!" Datil saluted and sat up.

"I'm sooo sorry! We'll be quiet so please forgive us! Pwease!" Fresa said, wiggling around and apologizing more than necessary.

They then both glanced at me, smirking. *Are you **sure** you guys can't hear me at all?*

"H-Hey! L-L-Look!" the coachman stammered as he brought the carriage to a halt.

"Awww, see? Look at that. It's all because you said you were bored, Apple-san," Datil said.

No no no! I never said anything of the sort! No wishing for monster ambushes or bandit blockades or anything!

Fresa chuckled. "But I'm sure we can leave these demons to our seniors."

You're right. Guess we'll check out their skills.

"Th-They're gobliiiiins!" came a shriek.

In front of us were those little green men. The passengers continued to scream in panic.

These monsters aren't that big of a deal. Besides, isn't that kind of rude? We've got two Rank C adventurers on our side, after all.

"Y-Yikes! I hope y'all can take care o' this!" the coachman said.

One of the adventurers clicked his tongue. "Damn, we're unlucky. Let's go!" He jumped off the carriage and drew his sword.

"Damn it! You guys just sit back and watch, okay?" the other bodyguard said

as he too jumped from the carriage. He wiped the sweat off his brow and hefted a large battle-axe.

Thank you! Allow us to learn, please!

There were three goblins, and they'd piled sticks and stones in the path to create a barricade that blocked the way as they waited for their victims. A fallen tree prevented any attempt to leave the road, and the terrain itself was too bumpy for the carriage to navigate effectively.

This is a good location for an ambush. But it's just three weak monsters—I'm sure it'll be over in a flash. The bigger problem is this barricade.

"Three, huh? This is a bit of a pain!"

"Yeah, we'll give it all we've got!"

Huh, really? If those three are a problem for you, that's not good, because...

"Furutsu!" Grida cried.

Yeah, those three are a diversion. The real group is actually behind us, slowly making their way over. They're planning on hitting from the rear while we're distracted with the three up here.

"Fresa-san, behind us," Datil said.

"Yeah, they're coming, aren't they?"

Nice, so you guys noticed too.

The two men roared as they charged toward the goblins in front, not even paying a shred of attention to their rear.

Nice.

Grida giggled. "You're mean sometimes, Furutsu."

Huh? No idea what you're talking about. Now then, it seems like the passengers and the coachman aren't aware of the main force either. Our Rank C seniors have their hands full, so I guess I'll go and do some cleanup real quick.

"Oh, are you going?" Datil said.

"I'm sure you'll be fine, but be careful!" Fresa said.

Yeah, I'll be back in a few. I jumped from the wagon and rolled full speed toward the back of our carriage.

*Let's do this! **Roll! Roll! Roll!***

"Furutsu, there's a big monster too," Grida said.

Okay, twenty-three goblins, and yeah, I see the huge one too.

She giggled. "He looks strong."

Yeah, he's probably stronger than your average goblin, but still, no match for me. Let's go, Grida! Unchain the wind, entreat the moon!

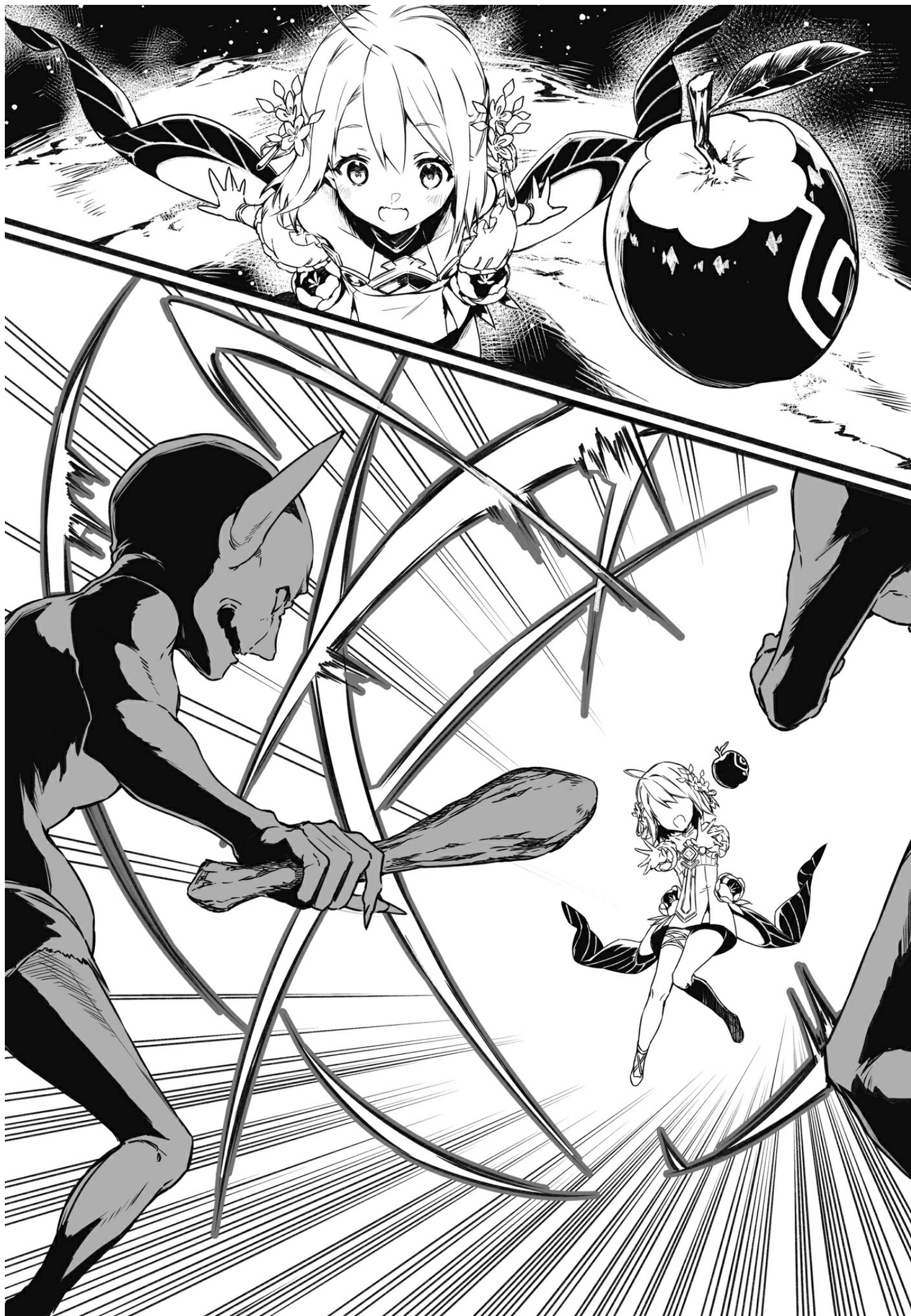
Grida giggled. "Unchain the wind, entreat the moon!"

Our wind blades found their mark, and twenty-four goblin heads fell to the ground in an instant.

I didn't notice since we have this hood over us, but it's getting dark.

"Fresa-san, we've arrived at a campsite," Datil said. The cities are quite far apart, so there are campsites along the way where people can rest in safety.

So we're camping here for today? In this world, day jobs like farming, manufacturing, and peddling aren't nine-to-fives. The day begins when the sun rises, and ends when it sets.



Also, though I've never measured this, it seems like a day doesn't equate to twenty-four hours. In fact, they don't seem to have a concept of "hours" at all—sunrise and sunset are all that matter.

"Ack, owww... Don't stop so suddenly!" one of the bodyguards said.

"Phew, glad we didn't run into any other monsters," said the other.

Night shifts began when the sun set, and ended with dawn. It was all very simple. We were supposed to make our preparations to weather the night before sunset, so the fact that we arrived at our campsite as it was getting dark showed that we were actually a little behind schedule. Of course, the two bodyguards who were responsible for this delay didn't apologize as they kept barking at us.

"Hey! You lot, walk around and find someone that can use healing magic!"

"You guys made it this far thanks to who?"

I'd like to ask you guys the same thing. How did you get that badly injured against just a few goblins? They were pretty beat up, but they did manage to win in the end.

"They didn't even defeat those monsters. They just kind of chased them away," Datil said.

"Who's ever heard of passengers having to dismantle the barricade?" Fresa added.

Now now, you two. Those Rank C folks did risk their lives for us, so let's forgive this. As a penalty, we're not healing them, which is a pretty mean punishment, isn't it?

"It sounds like you're the one who's *really* not forgiving them," Grida said.

Heh, well, it's not like those injuries are life-threatening. They should hang in there! Boys get stronger after getting hurt! Anyways, when I heard them say "campsite," I imagined something a bit more of a "one-with-nature" kind of thing. This looks more like a fortress.

A wooden fence was staked around the campsite, complete with numerous watchtowers. Each watchtower was equipped with arrows and bowguns, as

well as two soldiers apiece.

“Apple-san, it costs money to use this area,” Datil explained.

Makes sense. There’s so many people standing guard. If this were free, I’d like to know where their wages came from.

“If everything goes well, we should make it to the city in two days. So we’ll only use a campsite one more time,” Fresa said.

Once we’re past that city, we’ll need to actually camp out until we make it to Muruma. Grida and I don’t need to sleep, so it’s not like we need to take turns keeping watch though.

“All right. I’ve confirmed your payment. Welcome to Campsite #28!” The coachman handed a guard the money, and the gates slowly opened.

“Thanks for all yer hard work. This here’s a little somethin’ from me. Enjoy it all together, if ya don’t mind!” the coachman said as he handed over a barrel of liquor to one of the soldiers.

“Hey, thanks as always! Section 5, in the middle, is open for you. Relax and enjoy your stay!” the soldier said.

“Ah, thank ya!”

I knew it. That coachman knows how the world works. As we entered the walls, there were already a few tents and many people were making dinner. The carriage went deeper and deeper into the enclosure, finally stopping in front of a wooden building.

“M’dear adventurers, I’ll go ‘n’ look for a healer or a doctor for ya,” he said.

Ack, you don’t need to do that! Let them search for their own stuff! If I knew it was gonna be a pain for you, I would’ve cast my healing magic on them. Maybe overheal them a little.

Grida giggled. “Then they’d get all drunk like those ants!”

A lot cheaper than alcohol, don’t you think? Look at them, they’re not even putting up tents. They’re just drinking.

“That behavior’s a bit inappropriate, isn’t it?” Fresa said.

“Well, there’s all sorts of Rank C adventurers,” Datil said.

There weren’t any buildings other than the one we stopped in front of. There were only lines to divide the clearing into sections. Each person has to set up a tent or use a sleeping bag to make it through the night. This central building served as a sort of office for the guards. In other words, it was the safest location in the enclosure.

I guess that coachman gave them alcohol to secure the safest area for his passengers. Huh? That’s weird, the luggage area is...

“Over here! Ah, ’scuse me, sirs! A water magic user is here for ya!” the coachman said.

That was quick! He’s back already!

“You took your damn time!” said one of the pair.

“Over here! Hey granny, help us out!” said the other.

Wait wait wait! They’re so rude! Why’s this coachman all smiles?

“Huh, you heal pretty well.”

“Looks like you made decent use of all those years!”

After the water magician healed the two, she received payment from the coachman, bowed her head, and walked off.

Huh, he has to pay for that too?!

“It’d be awful if everyone assumed that all adventurers are like these two,” Datil said.

“I’m a bit embarrassed that I’m lumped in with them,” Fresa said.

Whoa, those Rank C goons better watch out. Looks like Fresa and Datil are running out of patience.

“The back o’ the carriage is open to the old folks and the kids. I really would appreciate it if the rest of y’all set up a tent or a sleeping bag,” the coachman said.

“Jeez, it sure was a pain to babysit these low rankers!”

The other adventurer laughed. “For sure! I’m beat!” The pair followed the coachman inside the tent.

Datil glared at them out of the corner of his eye. “Maybe we should say something,” he muttered.

“Wait, don’t do that! We can’t, like, cause a ruckus here!” Fresa said.

She’s right. If we make too much of a fuss, it might get in the way of our journey. Besides, those “higher rankers” almost died to a few little goblins. We should let them sleep for the road tomorrow.

“But Fresa-san, they’re...”

“Okay okay. Calm down. Let’s set up our tent and go to sleep.”

Good idea. We’ve still got a long way to go. Well, we don’t need to sleep though, do we, Grida?

Grida giggled. “What should we play today, Furutsu?”

Grida and I usually spend the night talking or playing board games to the best of our imaginations.

“Oh, let’s play Reversi! I’m white!”

Wait a sec, Grida. There’s something I’d like to confirm before that.

“And what’s that?”

There’s something I’m a little curious about.

The sun had completely set, and darkness and silence settled over the campsite. I quietly left the tent so as to not wake Fresa and Datil.

Roll...Roll...Roll...

“Furutsu, where are we going?”

*Just over there. **Roll...Roll...Roll...** See, we’re here.*

“Isn’t this the coachman’s tent?”

Grida, is there anyone inside?

“Huh? Nope, it’s empty. Where are they off to so late at night?”

I knew it. Could you check and see if they’re anywhere in your area of vision?

“Uhhh, oh! I found them! They’re in that tent over there!”

Nice job! You’re amazing, Grida! Let’s see... I rolled over to the lone tent, set up two sections over, and tried to eavesdrop.

“Heh. As we discussed, I’ll leave this to you,” said a voice.

That sounds like the coachman.

“Huh? But he sounds completely different!” Grida said.

You’re right. He doesn’t have an accent at all. In fact, he sounds very dignified.

“As you wish, Chief. The moment you pass this point, a wave of magic will be fired at the driver’s seat. Please do be careful so as to not be burned alive.”

The coachman laughed. “Your jokes never cease to amuse. How long do you think I’ve been in the bandit business?”

First goblins, now bandits. Datil’s really gonna think that I wished for all this.

“Furutsu, how did you know the coachman was a bad person?”

Because of the booze.

“The booze?”

Yeah. He only had the one barrel. We’re planning on stopping at one more campsite before the next city, aren’t we? Then at the very least, he should have one more barrel prepared.

“Oh, I see!”

Not to mention, he has a very good eye, but he chose clearly the worst adventurers possible—those weak goblins beat the crap out of them. They messed up, and they still talk big, but they haven’t been fired anyway. I’m sure they were very carefully and specifically picked as the worst adventurers ever.

We set out from the campsite the moment dawn broke, our carriage

clattering on the road. No demons popped out, and soon enough the sun illuminated the wilderness from above.

“Furutsu, will we really be okay?” Grida asked.

Of course. Leave it to me, Grida. It’s only natural that she’s worried. We hadn’t told Fresa or Datil that this carriage was going to be ambushed by bandits. However, I thought it’d be best if I handled this situation on my own. Reason being...

“I’m getting hungry. How about we grab a bite to eat?” one of our bodyguards said.

“Good call. Hey, old man! Let’s eat!” said the other.

Jeez, they’re making a fuss again. Honestly, ignorance might be bliss in this instance. They’ll never know that they were the worst adventurers possible, specifically selected to get killed.

“Oh, I’m sorry, y’all,” the coachman said. “I’d love to take a break ’round here, but they say that a whole lotta monsters turn up in these parts. It’s real dangerous, so could ya please wait a bit longer until we get through this place?”

Liar. There’s no need to feed someone who’s about to die, right?

“Shut up! We’re not adventurers if we’re scared of demons!”

“Come all they like! We’ll kill ’em all!”

You guys talk big for dudes who got wrecked by three goblins.

“Sirs, y’see, this area is a nest for man-eating worms. We’ll be worm food ’fore we get anything in our bellies,” the coachman responded.

We heard a quiet shriek. *Upon closer examination, those two bodyguards’ faces are getting paler by the second. They’re even trembling.*

“Th-That’s dangerous! Fine, we should move on a little farther, then,” one said.

“We’re okay, b-but we’re worried about you guys,” said the other.

“Thank you kindly,” the coachman said with a smile on his face.

Guess it must be easy for him to manipulate these no-good adventurers. I

haven't told Fresa or Datil about the bandits because I don't want that old man to find out that we know about his plan. Fresa and Datil are great actors, but I don't want to take the risk. You know what they say: "Deceive your friends before deceiving your enemy."

"I see! You're amazing!" Grida said.

Ha ha ha! You praise me too much!

"Ah, Furutsu! There's a lot of people! Some are hiding behind the rocks on either side of the road, and there are some on that hill! Eleven people in total!"

They're here. I'm ready whenever they are!

"Also, there's something over— Ack!" With a loud boom, the carriage went up in flames, cutting Grida off.

The luggage area and the hood aren't on fire yet. It's not about their accuracy—their magic is just too weak. Even on our weakest settings, our magic would burn the entire carriage, horses and all, to a crisp.

"Whoaaa!"

"Huh?! What's going on?"

Seems like all the passengers are panicking. I'm sure Fresa and Datil are also... Huh?

"They're here. Datil, can you fight?" Fresa said. She put on the rarely worn Perkunas's Mantle with her hood up, and gauged her surroundings.

"Of course! So you noticed it too, Fresa-san?" Datil said. He already had his hand on his blade's hilt, ready to fight.

Huh? What? What's going on?!

"Of couuurse we noticed! Apple-san, you've been on edge since this morning!" Fresa said.

You knew?! So I was the one not noticing things?!

"Hang in there, Furutsu!" Grida said.

Ugh, thank you, Grida. These two are amazing. How did they even notice an apple on edge?

“No time for questions right now. Take a look,” Datil said.

In a blink of an eye, the coachman, now the “Bandit Chief,” was standing in the middle of the luggage area. *He was always slouched over so I never noticed, but when he stands upright, he looks way more handsome and dignified. Surprisingly so.*

“Now then, everyone. I hope you all had a nice long journey,” he said in a more formal and quiet manner. The passengers all looked at him in confusion. “The two bodyguards, whose roles were to protect you, have died. I had them aboard to ensure your safe journey, but they have already fulfilled those roles.”

Datil and Fresa are looking just as worried as everyone else. Man, their acting is next level!

“Ah, where are my manners? My name is Gruszka, and I have been fortunate enough to represent a group in this area known as the Gruszka Group. I deeply apologize for the inconvenience, but from here on, I must forbid you all to do anything at all, unless specifically requested. Please make sure that you don’t stand up from your seat or talk needlessly.”

He’s probably introducing himself quietly and slowly to buy some time for his subordinates to get into position.

“I’ll say this in advance, but kindly refrain from making any sort of struggle or attempt at escape. I assure you that you will be killed. I do need you all to stay with me until the final stop that I’ve prepared.”

Final stop? So he’s not gonna steal all our stuff and kill us right here?

“W-Wait just a second!” the robed man yelled as he got up from his seat. “What are you saying all of a sudden? Just why are you doing this?!”

Hey, sit down! In situations like this, the first one to break the rules will be made into an example for the others!

“Oh, penalty for you,” Gruszka said. He suddenly took out a whip and nonchalantly swung at the robed man. There was a large crack as the man was flung toward the supports of the carriage hood. He yelped in pain.

See? Told you so. You’re an example for others now. Wait, something’s off

about him. A stream of blood trickled from the robed man's mouth, and he was wheezing pretty heavily. *Isn't this bad?*

"Oh my. You're rather weak, aren't you? You certainly are a hassle," Gruszka said as he shook his head and sighed. "Thieves arrive and break the water's seal. The damp unseen shall become nectar, and fill the empty sky. Water magic."

A blue light emanated from Gruszka, and the robed man's wounds started to heal. "I don't like wasting things, so I won't kill you. But this is your last chance, all right? If you move or talk again, I'll kill you without an ounce of hesitation. Please keep that in mind," he said with a smile.

He can use water magic, but he still went out of his way to find another water magic user yesterday? He really had his bases covered.

"Ah, yes, we don't need those things either." The moment he snapped his fingers, the horses let out a high pitched neigh, and the sounds of their hooves started fading into the distance.

Seems like we're completely stuck here now.

"Now, where was I? Not to worry! If you listen to me, I won't do anything to you. For now, at least."

His earlier example was extremely effective. None of the passengers dared to make a peep.

"There are certain ruins just a short distance away, where our base is located. I'd like for you all to follow me there."

Are we prisoners? Will we be sold somewhere? A good majority of the passengers are adult males, though. Wouldn't you want young women to sell?

"The ruins are actually rather deep. We found a labyrinth of some sorts artistically hidden within. And the entrance to this labyrinth was embedded with over one hundred large and high-quality jewels. We'd never seen jewels that large before! Isn't that wonderful?"

Labyrinth? Jewels in the entrance? What's that got to do with us?

"Now, here's the important bit. Do listen carefully. We couldn't remove the

jewels from the entrance, no matter how hard we tried. We couldn't take them out by force, and magic was equally ineffective." His tone was gleeful, and he gestured excitedly. "However, if only one person enters the labyrinth and closes the door, much to our surprise, one jewel falls from the entrance!"

Everyone started chattering. Gruszka smiled once again and bent his whip. In an instant, everyone looked down and fell silent.

"Once the door closes, a random amount of time must pass before it can be opened again. At times, it's one day, and sometimes it could be up to five. This is purely speculation on my part, but I think this correlates to the amount of time it takes for the person inside to die."

I see. So you want to shove each person here inside to get the jewels. We're just sacrifices.

"The jewel will only pop out when a single person enters the labyrinth. Should multiple people enter at once, not only will the jewel *not* fall, but a while thereafter—after quite a bit of screaming—their headless corpses will be tossed back out."

So you must enter alone. Wait, that's weird. How do they know there's a labyrinth inside?

"Oh, have you all caught on? Then why do we know that there's a labyrinth behind this door? Well, that's because we've had survivors, of course!"

Makes sense. How else could they have known?

"They were a very capable subordinate indeed. The door opened once more, and they stumbled out, their body and soul both worn. With their dying breath, they told us that there was 'a large tree at the end of the labyrinth.'"

What?!

"Furutsu, could it be?!" Grida cried.

Could this be the World Tree?!

"Now, let's go! As I've said before, any attempts to struggle or flee will only result in death," Gruszka said. The hood of the carriage came off, and we were able to see the two adventurers lying on their sides, a burnt section of the

carriage, and eleven fully armored bandits.

Of course they're armored. Jeez, under normal circumstances, this would be a seriously bad situation.

"Fresa-san, Apple-san, are you guys ready?" Datil asked.

"Whenever you are," Fresa replied.

Well, in our case, we won't really struggle against humans.

"Activate King of Apples."

Ding! "King of Apples has been activated. Please ensure that others are a safe distance away. Activating in: 10...9... You will feel a strong shock wave, please stand back. 3...2...1..."

Five apples appeared around Fresa. She decided to roll them on the floor this time—probably to be discreet about it.

"Ummm, these apples would kill them like this, wouldn't they? Soften and paralyzing nematocyst."

Ding! "All apples will be softened and given paralyzing nematocysts. 3...2...1... Upgrade complete."

Seems like she made some human-friendly adjustments. Paralyzing nematocyst sounds terrifying though.

"Oh, are you good? Then I guess I'll go next. Cell Manipulation," Datil said.

Ding! "Cell Manipulation has been activated. Remaining time: 59...58...57..."

All right, let's get started. This'll be over in an instant, so stay with me, okay?

"Apple-san, here," Datil said. His figure wavered for a split second. In the next moment, the bandits' equipment was collectively flung into the air.

Damn, you're fast! Grida, would you please collect all of this?

"Okay!" Their knives, bowguns, and other weapons flew toward me as Grida collected them all.

Excellent precision, Datil. We've disarmed the bandits in a flash.

"Wh-What?! What's going on?" Gruszka yelled as he glanced at his

surroundings. Everything happened so quickly that it took him some time to process.

“Don’t move.” To Gruszka, it seemed as though Datil’s sword appeared out of nowhere, pointed between his eyes.

Game, set, match.

“Huh?! You’re...”

“Just a passenger. I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but our destination is much farther north.”

Gruszka laughed. “To think there was someone of this caliber in Rank E! But it’s not over yet!” He looked to the side, and the other bandits surrounded Datil as they started chanting spells. For a split second, Datil followed Gruszka’s gaze and looked away—but Gruszka took the opportunity to jump behind him.

Huh, so I guess he isn’t a chief for nothing. He’s pretty agile.

“I thought you’d do something like that! This might hurt a biiiit! Apple Meteor!” Fresa cried. She took down the surrounding bandits, one by one.

“Gah! This hurts!”

“M-My body won’t move!”

“Heeelp...”

The apples were softened like rubber bullets, and as such were nonlethal to the bandits. The paralyzing nematocysts had successfully incapacitated them all.

They shouldn’t be able to cast spells anymore. Seems like only three of his goons could use magic in the first place though.

“Don’t move, okay? If you do, I’ll fire two of these apples at you!” Two apples floated in front of Fresa’s outstretched arms. With a look of defeat, Gruszka forced a bitter laugh.

“Well, well, well. Seems like this is it for me. I surrender.”

Even Gruszka should just raise his hands and admit defeat... Huh?!

“You would’ve liked me to say that, wouldn’t you?” In a flash, a round black

item appeared in both of his hands. “Now! You’d best not touch me—or even move at all! I’ve purposefully made these very, *very* delicate. If I drop them from this height, this entire area will go up in flames! Everyone here will die.”

The bombs had designs straight out of a manga or video game. *They even have fuses. Jeez, the shape is really obvious!*

“Hmmm. This was outside of my expectations,” Fresa mumbled with a troubled expression. The apples were still floating around her.



“Now then, if you’ll excuse us,” Gruszka said. “Ahem, boys! Take everyone here except for these two brave idiots! If someone can’t move, lend them a hand!” The bandits swiftly tied up the rest of the passengers.

They’re used to this, and they’re not getting close to us either. Taking us along might make things tricky for them, and they’re probably satisfied if they get their minimum quota from the other passengers.

“Apple-san, can’t you collect those bombs?” Fresa asked.

Unfortunately, no. After experimenting, I found out that Grida can’t collect any item that’s being held or worn by someone else. Even if they’re just lightly pinching something with their thumb and index finger, there’s no collecting it.

“That looks like a no, I guess,” she said.

Again, how can you tell?

“Damn. If we move recklessly, everyone is going to die. We can’t really apply any shock to those bombs either,” Datil said. If he tried to take those bombs like he did with the weapons earlier, it might cause them to explode.

“Chief! We’re done with our preparations!” a bandit called out.

“Very good!”

Damn it! At this rate, they’ll escape! Should I use the sleeping spell? No, he might drop those bombs. If I don’t collect them in time, this’ll go bad.

“Whoa there, don’t move! My bombs are rather effective. Stay put,” he said. “Right as you are.”

“Wait! Huh? When did you light its fuse?!” Datil cried out.

I turned my attention to the fuse and saw that he was right. Sparks were flying. *No way! We only have a few seconds to spare! Gruszka’s really good at sleight of hand—he could become a stage magician! Stop, now’s not the time. I was a bit too naive.*

“Damn! Fresa-san!” Datil called. He stepped in front of Gruszka as if to protect Fresa from the blast.

“Datil?!”

No! Even if that armor is high quality, the explosion would happen at point-blank range! Ugh, what should I do?!

“Ah, yes. Here’s a little present for you,” Gruszka said, throwing the bombs in the air.

Fresa screamed.

“Wh-What?!” Datil yelled.

The bombs, hurled high into the air, formed an arc as they dropped toward the ground. Gruszka, who had already mounted his horse, let loose an evil laugh.

He moves so quickly! Is he really human?!

“Good day to you all!” he laughed.

Okay, Grida. Collect those bombs!

Grida giggled. “I’ve already done that for you!”

Oh, you’re right. They’re gone. Nice work, Grida!

“Yay, you praised me again!”

“WHAAAAAT?!” Gruszka was so shocked by the sudden disappearances of the bombs that he forgot to flee.

You said it was a present for us, so I accepted it. What are you so surprised about? In any case, this was too close of a call. I guess there are times when humans are dangerous enemies too. I should keep that in mind.

“Whew, you saved us.” Datil breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you, Apple-san,” Fresa said.

No need to thank me, ha ha ha! I didn’t do anything this time around.

“Ah, Furutsu! They’re coming!” Grida said.

Got it. Then I guess we don’t need to hold back, do we?

“Okay!”

Are the bombs that Grida collected safe inside the storage, you ask? Like God told us before, anything in the storage card is frozen in time. As long as we

don't take them out, the bombs will just sit there, fuses lit. *Wait, if that's the case, how can Grida move around? Why isn't she frozen in time?*

"They're coming, Fresa-san."

"So they are."

So you guys noticed it too? Chief Gruszka was surprised when the bombs vanished, but he wasn't an evil boss just for show. He started using the passengers as his shields.

"D-Don't move! That's right, stay put—or else these innocent people might die, like those two foolish Rank C adventurers! Burnt to a crisp!" Gruszka said.

What are you talking about? Certainly, those two are fools, but...

"Ugh... Huh? What? Wh-What's going on?" one said.

"My vision went red and... Huh?! What?!" the other cried.

They're not dead. Perfect timing, guys.

"Huh?! Why are you fools alive?! I'm sure we used our fire magic!" Gruszka said.

You were told to be careful to not get burned alive last night. So I used my magician card to add those two no-good adventurers to my safety settings.

Fresa giggled. "I knew it. You did something, didn't you, Apple-san?"

"Huh. I would've just silently offered a prayer for their passing after this was all over. You're too nice," Datil said.

Heh, guess so! Besides, I need those two to do some stuff for me.

"Hey, coachman! What's all this about?!" the adventurer said.

"Huh? You seem a bit different," the other observed.

My God, they're terrible adventurers. I'm not asking you to fully understand the situation, but learn to read the mood a little.

"Shut up, you trash! Die!" Gruszka cracked his whip at the duo. Datil, who was still able to move faster than the whip, protected them. The strikes, reflected by Loga's Leather Armor, completely crushed the wooden boxes and carriage

around him.

What do you mean by “too nice,” Datil? After all you’ve said, you’re protecting them too.

One of the pair shrieked. “Wh-What’s going on?!”

“H-Huh?! You’re so strong, coachman!” the other screamed.

Seems like they’ve finally understood the gravity of the situation. Both of them are trembling on the ground now.

“You deflected those attacks? D-Damn it! Get out of my way!” Gruszka said. As he prepared to use his whip once more, we heard a low growl in the distance. A veritable horde of beasts then appeared from behind the rocks and above the hill. “H-Huh?”

“Are those gerugeres? There’s so many of them!” someone cried.

So that’s what they’re called. At a glance, they look like really large tigers.

The gerugeres growled menacingly. I’m sure it’s obvious, but these guys were classic carnivores. This was most likely what Grida was referring to before she was cut off by the carriage exploding earlier. The monsters slowly closed the distance, surrounding the carriage. There were at least fifty of them.

“They’re too close! A-At this distance, my evasion potion and barriers won’t make it in time,” Gruszka muttered.

Looks like he gave up once he was surrounded.

“Oh, you’re quick to surrender, huh?” Datil’s voice was dripping with sarcasm as he smirked at the bandit chief.

“Don’t you understand? Resistance is futile. In a moment, we’ll be in their stomachs.”

If you wish, you can get eaten alone. Although, since they’re carnivores, I doubt they’d want to eat an apple like myself.

Fresa chuckled. “Would you like for us to save you?”

Okay, it’s a little scary that you’re smiling in this situation.

Gruszka laughed. “Hah, how foolish! You lot are pretty tough for Rank E, but

surely there's nothing you can do in this hopeless situation?" He seemed to be laughing from the bottom of his heart.

"Huuuh? This is easy for me."

"Huh?! Stop kidding yourselves! You guys had your hands full with a dozen or so of us humans!"

"Hands full? Who are *you* kidding? Of course we had to hold back against humans. We don't need to do the same for demons, so this is obviously easier for us," Datil retorted.

He's right. If we went all out, we could've won a lot easier. It's difficult to fight without killing, you know?

"H-Hold back?! How's that possible?" Gruszka said.

You think we're lying? Want me to show you?

"Oh? You seem fired up," Datil said to me.

"Then we can leave this to you, maybe?" Fresa added.

You guys have an insane ability to read apples. How can you tell that I'm fired up? Now, what request do you have today, Fresa? (Hey, Grida, wanna make a bet? If it's wind, you can use your magic. If it's fire, I'll do it!)

Grida giggled. "You're on!"

Fresa picked me up and raised me in the air. "Use your wind and fire apple magic!" she shouted.

Ha ha, a mix of the two? Are you sure you can't hear us? Anyways, Grida, let's do this at the same time.

"Yay! We'll show them the power of our love!" Grida said.

L-Love?! Uh, yeah, I mean, I guess. Ahem. I hope they're high-ranking monsters! That way, we can make more coins!

Anyway, since I'm a plant, I can look in all directions at once and lock on to all the monsters around me. Let's do this! Remove the shackles of fire, traveler!

"Unchain the wind, entreat the moon!"

Two announcements played at once.

Ding! “Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at three percent.”

Ding! “Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at three percent.”

The announcement is hard to hear if we both use our spells at the same time!

Fwoosh! Fwoom!

Fwish! Swoosh!

A countless number of fireballs and wind blades launched toward the demons.

“Eep?! Just who *are* you guys? Aren’t you supposed to be low-rankers?” one of the adventurers said.

“Amazing! I’ve never seen magic this beautiful!” said the other.

Wind blades separated each of the gerugeres’ enormous heads from their bodies, and the fire scorched them before they collapsed.

Yeah, looks like Grida’s magic is much faster than mine.

“Hey, Fresa-san! You’ve made one too many requests! This is clearly overkill,” Datil said.

Fresa giggled. “It’ll be easier for us to boss those people around if we’re flashy here.”

I get it. If Gruszka and those two loser adventurers see all this, they’ll be more inclined to do what we say.

Chapter 3: Into the Labyrinth

I was rolling around to collect the demon corpses when Grida said, “Furutsu, I think that should do it.”

Good. We’ve collected all the dead gerugeres now. Thanks, Grida. They’d ended up all over this big clearing, so it was kind of a pain to get them all, huh? Let’s go back.

“Okay!”

The gerugeres had been burned to a crisp, with the majority being not much more than ashes, so I was relieved that I could use Turn Reversal to revert them to decidedly not charred corpses. As I rolled toward the carriage, I heard some voices.

“Oh, don’t be absurd! You don’t have to joke around like that!” said one of the Rank C adventurers.

“As I’ve said before, we’re truly only Rank E!” came Datil’s troubled reply.

“Now, now, no need to be so humble, sir!”

Sir?

“Ah, ma’am! Allow us to carry those heavy items!”

Ma’am?

“Ugh, what’s with you guys?!” Fresa said.

The Rank C adventurers had started to kiss up to Datil and Fresa. *Boy, they’ve done a one-eighty.*

“And what are you planning on doing with us?” Gruszka and his subordinates had their hands tied behind their backs. They’d completely lost their will to fight after seeing the show of strength Grida and I had put on.

“We’ll hand you over to the authorities. But we’ll have you *specifically*, Gruszka, come along and act as our guide,” Datil replied. At his suggestion, we

decided to head for the next campsite with the eleven bandits and eight passengers in tow. The two Rank C adventurers acted as our coachmen and bodyguards. “I’m relying on you two to get us to our destination before the sun sets, all right?”

“Of course! We’d be honored!” the two bodyguards said, bowing their heads.

We decided to use the bandits’ horses since the carriage horses had fled, but we were clearly over the weight limit. Passengers that were experienced in horseback riding were to individually mount any remaining horses and tag along.

“We’re still over the limit, it seems. Okay, activate King of Apples!” Fresa said.

Ding! “King of Apples has been activated. Please ensure that others are a safe distance away. Activating in: 10...9... You will feel a strong shock wave, please stand back. 3...2...1...”

Five apples floated around her. “Nourishing tonic. Enhance physical capabilities.”

Ding! “All apples will have nourishing effects and enhance physical capabilities. 3...2...1... Upgrade complete.”

“I’m sorry. I’m going to need you guys to push yourselves a little,” she said to the four horses pulling our carriage as she fed each of them an apple. The horses neighed, and we could hear a bubbling sound as their muscles started growing.

That’s terrifying! They got bigger!

“Now we should be fine until we reach the campsite. They’re gonna be real sore and won’t be able to move for the next few days though.”

The horses started breathing heavily as though they were ready to run any second now. *Hey, don’t push the limits too much, Fresa.*

“And this last apple is for you guys, okaaay?” she said, handing over the remaining apple to the Rank C adventurers. “Be careful though. Only eat this when you’re in a pinch, and even then, only take one bite. Your power will go through the roof.”

“Whoa, thank you so much, ma’am! You’re awesome!”

“We’ll be unstoppable with this!”

Hey, we shouldn’t get too ahead of ourselves. That apple will...

“But don’t eat it if you can help it. It’s not bad for your body or anything, but it’ll take a toll on you afterward. Seriously, *one* bite when you *really* need to, okay?” Fresa warned.

As a side note, horses in this world had shorter legs, but were much more muscular. It seemed power was more desired than speed.

“Heh, copy that, ma’am!”

“One bite when we’re in a pinch!”

Are you sure you guys are responsible enough? Look what happened to those horses! I shudder to think what would happen to a human.

“Then I’ll leave our request to you,” Datil said.

“Tell them not to head toward Muruma,” Fresa added.

“Roger that. We’ll take care of it,” the adventurer said.

Our request was simple. They were to catch up to Berry, Júzi, and Arguta, who were headed toward Muruma, and stop them. We’d thought that even this Rank C pair could handle it. Of course, our group would love to do it ourselves if we could, but we had another stop to make first.

“Well then, we’ll head out!” said one.

“Sir, ma’am! Take care of yourselves! Let’s meet again!” said the other.

The cracks of the whip faded into the distance as the horses ran at breakneck speed, not minding that they were over capacity. The remaining passengers on horseback chased them from behind. *Will they really be okay?*

“Okay, we should head out as well,” Datil said.

“Yeah! I’m so excited to visit the ruins!” Fresa replied.

“Apple-san, why did you also want to tag along? I understand why Fresa-san wants to, since she loves jewels and stuff, but...”

That's right. Our stop is the labyrinth in the deepest area of the bandits' base. I'm a little worried whether those Rank C guys could stop Berry and the others, but I definitely want to confirm what the deal is with that large tree that Gruszka's subordinate claimed to have seen within the maze.

"Heeey, Datil! I never said I wanted any jewels!"

"Oh, you don't? Then we can leave those behind, I suppose."

"Huh?! Nooo! You're such a meanie!"

Get a room, will you? Stop flirting while we're horseback riding! We've got you two and a tied-up Gruszka on a single horse! Don't you feel even a little bad for it while you're making all this fuss? Speaking of, even I know that Fresa's after the jewels, but how the heck did you figure out that I wanted to visit the ruins too?

"Are you two seriously going to enter the labyrinth?" a surprised Gruszka asked them.

"Of course. Isn't that right, Datil?" Fresa said.

"Yes. It's clear that something lies within that labyrinth. As an adventurer, that makes me really excited."

Ha ha ha, you sure sound fired up, Datil. But before that, it seems like we've got another mandatory event to pass through. Isn't that right, Grida?

"Yep! It's very big and very gross," Grida said.

In the next moment there was a loud thud, and a huge creature emerged from the dust. Fresa and Datil yelled in surprise. *I guess even they couldn't pick up on this thing. It was masking its presence under the sand, waiting for us to inch closer.*

"You noticed, Furutsu? That's amazing," Grida said.

Yeah. I didn't see it, but I definitely felt something odd in the air. Looks like a big worm.

The creature roared loudly. *It's about as big as a building, and really loud to boot. Tentacle-like appendages were wriggling around on top of its head, and its mouth was lined with a circle of sharp teeth. I feel like I've seen something*

like this in a movie before.

“Eep! A-A sandworm?! Why is there one here?!” Gruszka shouted.

Right, a sandworm! Wait, are we legally allowed to say that? No copyright laws here?

“Gross! Like, what does it eat to get that big?!” Fresa yelled.

“Hey, what in the world *is* that thing?!” Datil yelled.

Huh? You were able to identify that big siratar, a demon that I doubt anyone has seen grow to that size, but you don’t know this monster? Is it rare or something?

“This is a sandworm! It’s a legendary demon that lives in the deserts of the west!” Gruszka said.

Oooh, a legendary monster! So we’ve got a rare encounter here, do we? Will it drop a treasure box if we defeat it?

“Forget defeating it, no one has really even seen this beast before. Everyone who encounters it is devoured on the spot! The old legend goes that it swallows everything, from people to carriages, and melts down steel armor—and bones too!”

I see! So any treasure boxes would melt down too! Wait, isn’t that bad? It totally doesn’t have any loot then. We’re just getting attacked with no benefits!

“Furutsu, maybe we can use its corpse for Fresa-san’s Hoard Lottery,” Grida said.

Oh, right! You’re right! You’re a genius, Grida!

“Another thing,” Gruszka explained. “Once a sandworm is killed, its body turns to sand. Because the corpse disappears, it’s regarded as more of a legend!”

I see! So we can’t dissect it or make it into a specimen. Isn’t that bad? If we don’t get a corpse, we can’t use it for the Hoard Lottery! There’s no plus in fighting this thing! What a waste!

“Hang in there, Furutsu! This isn’t about benefits or waste! If we don’t fight,

we'll get eaten!" Grida said.

The sandworm roared loudly, opening its jaws. *Shut up, sandworm! Like you said, Grida, at this rate, we'll all get eaten! I probably won't add much to the meal though. I'm too small.*

"Here I go. Cell Manipulation!" Datil said.

Ding! "Cell Manipulation has been activated. Remaining time: 59...58...57..."

He jumped from the horse and ran toward the sandworm. *As always, I'm impressed by his speed.*

"Hah!" he yelled as he swiftly swung his sword. Sparks flew from the sandworm's skin, and a sharp metallic sound echoed in the air. "Ugh, I c-can't cut through it!" Above him, the sandworm opened its mouth wide and dove straight toward its prey.

"Whoa!" Datil said as he dodged the attack. Each time the monster struck, shock waves spread through the ground. Datil rolled around, evading each of the sandworm's relentless attacks by a hair.

*Hey, that's part of **my** identity! Don't roll without my permission!*

Ding! "All apples will be hardened, super oxidized, and receive high-speed rotation. 3...2...1... Upgrade complete."

Fresa had already activated her ability and shouted toward the sandworm. "Jeez, Datil! What are you doing?! Apple Meteor!"

The five rotating apples flew toward the sandworm, breaking through its tough skin. We heard a loud sizzle, followed by the sweet scent of baked apples—which quickly morphed into a burning smell. The sandworm roared once more, however, seemingly unfazed by the damage.

"Huh?! Why isn't it working?!" Fresa yelled.

It's too big. You barely burned the outer layer of its skin, and haven't done much else. Worst case, you might not have damaged it at all.

"It's my turn next! One hundred percent! Unchain the wind, entreat the moon!" Grida said. A wind blade soared straight toward the sandworm with a loud whoosh. Her power was immense—the blade was larger than the

monster's neck.

Not sure if the words “blade” and “neck” are accurate here though. Whatever, let's not worry too much about it. But the moment the wind blade made contact, it disappeared into thin air.

“Huh?! Why? What happened?” she cried.

What?! Even Grida's magic didn't do damage?

Ring! Ring! “Warning! Magic spell has been resisted.”

“The magic disappeared?! What's going on?” Fresa said, jumping up and down while pointing at the worm.

“Could it be protected by a guardian?! This is a bit of a pain!” Datil shouted as he continued to dodge its attacks.

A guardian? That sounds familiar. Uhhh...

“Furutsu, remember the baby dragon in the city? They said magic didn't work on it,” Grida said.

That's right! You have a good memory. I do remember them saying that when we were in Kalabuya. So this thing isn't just big, but kind of tricky to defeat too.

“Apple-san! Don't just sit there looking impressed!” Fresa said.

I'd love to ask how you knew what I was thinking, but now's not the time. Swords, magic, and apples are all ineffective. All right then, I guess I'll use my skill. Shackle!

Ding! “Shackle has been activated. Please be careful of your surroundings.”

Clanking sounds filled the air as shackles started appearing. *These shackles are from the curse card, connecting me, Grida, Fresa, and Datil. Plus, I should be the only one who can see them, but...*

“Ah, it's those shackles!” Datil said.

“That's the move that killed the queen ant!” Fresa said.

Apparently I'm not the only one. Both Fresa and Datil could see these shackles. As you've noted, Fresa, this move was last used at the Chasm of Catastrophe. Guess I'm firing my ultimate again! This demon's a bit big—will my shackles be

long enough? Let's do this. Funerary Shackles!

Ding! “Activating Funerary Shackles. The coffin will appear in: 30...29...28... Please be wary of your surroundings. I repeat, please be wary of your surroundings. 24...23...”

Jangle. Jingle. Clink!

That worm's big, so I've gotta hurry.

“Wh-What's that apple doing?!” Gruszka cried with surprise.

You just saw King of Apples, and you're in shock over me? Apples these days can fly, jump, roll, and cast magic. Keep that in mind.

Jangle. Jingle. Clink!

I jumped and rolled around the sandworm, wrapping it in my chains. *Damn, this thing's too big! It's like I'm trying to truss a whale!* It didn't seem to notice me, though, as it was relentlessly attacking Datil. *Well, it's time to say our goodbyes.*

Ding! “The Funerary Shackles will now be deployed. Join your hands together in prayer. For those attending the cremation, a bus has been prepared for you. Please board immediately.”

I'm not really sure if anyone would miss this legendary monster though...

The sandworm roared with confusion. A honking sound played and the chains went taut, as the demon was crushed into little pieces before turning into sand.

If there really is a World Tree at the end of this maze, we need to be extremely careful.

“Furutsu, what's wrong?” Grida asked.

Be careful. The term “sandworm” is safe. That's fine. However! A labyrinth with a World Tree is no good. Shortening this or changing its phrasing in any way will leave us a little too close to a certain game series on a dual screen, and we'll be in hot water in terms of copyright. Those two words should never be used in the same sentence!

“Huh?! That sounds terrifying.”

Exactly. The real world is indeed terrifying. An “I didn’t know” won’t cut it. Remember those gerugere things that looked like cats? Just one letter difference and it’ll resemble a particular list of names given to a certain hero in an RPG classic.

“Apple-san? Why are you trembling?” Datil asked.

“Datil, it’s trying to be meta right now. We should just act like nothing’s happening,” Fresa replied.

Hey, stop it you guys! Ahem, moving on! How dare you, Gruszka!

“We completely let our guards down. He certainly isn’t a chief for nothing.”

“Hey, stop admiring him, Datil!”

Gruszka had acted obedient and led us into the deepest area of the ruins. The moment we’d all stepped foot into the entrance of the labyrinth, however, he sprang his traps.

“A trap that forcibly pushes people from the entrance into the labyrinth... Who would’ve thought?” Datil said.

As it happens, a number of traps had been activated. From arrows to spears to giant logs, a multitude of weapons flew out toward us. In addition, the magic seal on the ground transformed into a moving walkway like you’d see at an airport, guiding us toward the labyrinth with amazing speed. In the next moment, the entrance had automatically shut, with us inside.

“We were too focused on the entrance, weren’t we?” Fresa said.

“You were too focused on the *jewels* embedded in the entrance, weren’t you?”

Yeah. Your eyes had this air of intensity, and you had an...interesting expression on your face.

“Heeey! Be quiet, Datil-san! You too, Apple-san!” she pouted.

I didn’t say anything. Verbally, at least.

“In any case, this is kind of bad, isn’t it?” Datil remarked.

“Right. I thought only one person could enter at a time. All three of us are here.”

Yeah, we’ve got Fresa, Datil, and...the last person isn’t me actually.

“Why has everything gone dark? A-Are we inside the labyrinth?! Why am I with you guys?!” the bandit chief yelled.

It’s Gruszka.

“Hey, he undid the restraints on his arms!” Datil shouted.

Fresa giggled. “We really can’t keep our eyes off him. But I think Apple-san’s got the upper hand this time.”

We were in the deepest part of the ruins. Gruszka had been keeping his distance from us since we’d arrived at the labyrinth entrance, so I used my Shackle ability from the curse card to keep him close with my invisible binds. *I’m glad I was able to recast this.*

“I see. The shackles!” Datil said.

I guess even you can’t see them unless you’re focused.

“I was so focused on the entrance that I didn’t notice a thing,” Fresa said.

You were so focused on the jewels, weren’t you?

Ding! “The effect of Shackle has expired. Recast cooldown: 3600...3599...3598...” With a clank, the shackles released Gruszka. I needed to wait for about an hour before it could be used again.

“Why?! Why was I dragged in here too?!” Gruszka said, panicked from being suddenly yanked into a dark passageway.

“You deserve it! You never learn,” Fresa said.

Although Fresa and Datil couldn’t see as well as I could, the curse card increased their physical capabilities, allowing them to see relatively well in the dark.

“We shouldn’t be looking around aimlessly. Our heads will fall if multiple people are in here at once, right?” Datil said.

He was right; if more than two normal humans entered this labyrinth, they

would die. I was able to confirm this via the mysterious voice that we'd been hearing on repeat.

Ring! Ding! "Humans have been confirmed. Welcome to Gaokerena Palace. From this room onward, we will remove all foreign objects. Please ensure that only one person at a time enters. Forcible entries will activate our self-defense mechanism which is extremely dangerous." **Ring! Ding!** "Humans have been confirmed. Welcome to Gaokerena Palace. From this room onward..."

"Is this looping?" Grida asked.

Yeah. Seems like an announcement to warn any visitors, but it sounds like only you and I can hear it. Maybe only plants can pick it up?

"Gaokerena Palace? What's a self-defense mechanism, Furutsu?"

See that door? Beyond it is a room that removes dirt, dust, mold, and germs that visitors may be bringing in. We have to enter that room one at a time. Failing to do so might confuse the system—like it thinks that not all the foreign objects were removed.

"So it cleans everything we brought from the outside world?"

That's right, clever girl. And if more than two people enter that door, we're breaking the rules. To prevent anyone from bringing in any foreign objects, the visitors just get decapitated instead. That's what they mean by self-defense mechanism.

Grida shrieked. "That's scary!"

The people who entered this labyrinth before us weren't able to hear this announcement, which also served as a warning. I feel like there's no point in warning people if they can't hear you, but there's a good chance that the creator of this area isn't aware of this. There's a possibility that there are humans out there that could actually hear this announcement.

"Furutsu, so the people that entered this area two at a time are..."

Yeah. They most likely opened the door and entered the room together. Same deal if three of them got tossed in here. That's why they were all decapitated and thrown back out.

“Okay, so what do we do with Fresa-san and the others?”

That’s the problem. We’re the only ones who can hear this warning and we don’t even have a method to convey our thoughts to them. If we don’t, their heads will roll, Gruszka’s included. Don’t be too rash, you guys.

“Should we try proceeding for now?” Datil suggested.

Huh?! Wait wait! Stop! Down!

“You’re right. There’s no sense in staying here,” Fresa agreed.

No no no! You’ll die, you know? Your heads will roll!

“Wait! What’s going on? It’s too dark for me to see!” Gruszka yelled. It seemed like he wasn’t able to see anything at all. Noticing this, Fresa reluctantly turned on her lantern. “Eek! So we really *are* inside the labyrinth?! If multiple people enter here, w-w-we’ll die!”

Gruszka was trembling with fear. *Serves you right. I’d love to just throw you into that room alone, but...*

“You’ll be fine if you stick with us. But you should cooperate,” Datil said.

Datil and Fresa won’t leave him alone; they’re too nice. There’s a good chance they’ll try to enter the room after him.

“Fresa-san, Apple-san, let’s go!”

“Yes, but let’s be careful,” she replied, nodding at Datil. She picked me up.

Wait! Don’t go! You mustn’t!

“Huuuh? Datil, I feel like Apple-san’s telling us to stay here,” she said.

“You’re right. I wonder why.”

Whew! I’m glad my thoughts are being conveyed! I don’t know how, but still!

“N-No! No way! If we stay here, we’ll die! Our heads will be gone!” Gruszka screamed as he started throwing a fit.

“Hey, calm down! Why are you suddenly being so difficult?!” Fresa yelled.

“He’s probably seen many of his subordinates die. He’s terrified that he’ll meet the same fate and is in a total state of panic!”

Gruszka wriggled out of Fresa's grasp and dodged Datil's arms as he rushed toward the door. As I had expected, the two started to run after him. *No! All three of you will die at this rate! Why does Gruszka run so fast?!*

"Stop! Calm down!" Datil yelled.

"No! We don't know what's up ahead!" Fresa wailed.

Gruszka wobbled around as he ran, and the two chased after him. The announcement, paying no heed to the situation, repeated itself once more as it echoed through the narrow passageway. "From this room onward, we will remove all foreign objects. Please ensure that only one person at a time enters. Forcible entries will activate our self-defense mechanism which is extremely dangerous." **Ring! Ding!** "Humans have been confirmed. Welcome..."

If they heard this announcement, they would never imagine entering this room all at once, but it seems like they really can't hear it at all.

"How about you use your shackles to stop them?" Grida suggested.

I can't. They're still on cooldown, and it'll take some time before I can use them again.

Gruszka huffed. "I found it! Whew. I found a door! An exit!" He laughed while trying to catch his breath and grabbed the handle.

No! Don't open that! It's not an exit!

"Ah, Furutsu! Use your sleep magic!"

Oh yeah! Good thinking, Grida! Darkness from below...

Beep Beep! "Detected magic manipulation. Activating Antiphase Field. Magic will be neutralized and nullified."

...will desire the Heavens! Wait, what did it just say?

Ding! "The spell is incomplete. Please recite the full spell to activate magic."

My spell is incomplete? What does that mean?! Darkness from below will desire the Heavens!

Ding! "The spell is incomplete. Please recite the full spell to activate magic."

I can't cast anything! It said it detected magic manipulation and was

activating an Antiphase Field. Does it mean I can't use spells here?

"Yes! I made it! Outside!" Gruszka gloated.

This is bad! He opened the door and jumped right in!

"I'm telling you that it's dangerous!" Datil roared.

"Wait! That doesn't go outside! Stop!" Fresa yelled.

Datil and Fresa chased Gruszka into the room, and I was still in Fresa's hands. *Damn it! The door's closed!* The small room had no lights and was illuminated only by Datil's lantern. It felt cold and was mostly blank, looking oddly modern. It was completely different from any building that I'd seen in this world before.

Beep! Beep! "Confirmed entry of multiple persons. Locking onto [3] necks. Decapitation will commence in 59...58...57..."

Don't say something so terrifying so casually! That's not the only thing that's scary though.

"Wh-What is this?!"

"This is terrible!"

The room was filled with skeletons. *I imagined this place looking more like clean room storage, but it's actually more like a horror movie.*

"Eek! N-No... Noooooo!"

See? Even the audience is screaming. Anyway, this isn't ideal. At this rate, they're all gonna die.

"Fresa-san, where are we?" Datil asked.

"Judging from Apple-san's look, probably not anywhere good," she replied.

Correct. If you guys had heard that announcement, you'd be way more scared.

"The door—ugh—won't open. Could you please stand back a little?" Datil said. He rammed his body against the door and tried to use his sword to pry it open. "No good. It won't even budge."

Okay, it's do or die here. Grida, let's attack the door with our full power!

"Okay! With one hundred percent of my power, unchain the wind, entreat

the moon!”

Ding! “The spell is incomplete. Please recite the full spell to activate magic.”

Strength at a hundred percent! Unchain the wind, entreat the moon!

Ding! “The spell is incomplete. Please recite the full spell to activate magic.”

No good. Our spells are totally nullified!

“Intruders will be removed in 35...34...33...”

We don't have much time! At this rate, all three of their heads will fly! Wait, hold on. That's weird.

“What's wrong, Furutsu?” Grida asked.

Why are there corpses in here? I thought you were supposed to get decapitated and then thrown out of this room.

“You're right. How strange.”

Decapitated and thrown out...? Oh! That's it!

“15...14...13...”

Then I might be able to protect them with that thing! Grida, could you take out an item from the storage real quick?

“10...9...8...”

“Huh?! But why?” Grida said.

I'll explain later! We don't have time! Put it over there!

“Are you sure?! Um, so I take this and put it there...”

Thump!

“3...2...1... Decapitation will commence.”

Thud! Clank! Whoosh! Three odd sounds echoed in the chamber.

“Wh-What was that?!” Datil cried.

“Huh? What was that sound?” Fresa yelled.

“Ahhhhhhh! I can't see! Why?! H-Help!” Gruszka wailed.

Everyone's safe. Great! I knew it!

"That's amazing! But how?" Grida asked.

Look at the corpses around you. Their necks aren't severed, are they?

"Huh? Oh, you're right."

Once this room detects multiple people, it cuts their heads off and spits them out. If your head isn't severed, you won't be attacked again, but you also won't be able to leave this room. That means...

"You don't mean..."

Yeah. They're trapped in this room forever. The corpses in this room most likely died from starvation, suicide, or turning against each other.

"I feel bad for them. But why didn't they get decapitated?"

Armor. These skeletons are all wearing armor or helmets that guard the neck area.

"Oh, you're right!"

In fact, some of them aren't even steel. Look over there. That's leather armor fitted together with rivets. If armor that lousy could block this attack, half-decent stuff should be plenty. Perkunas's Mantle and Loga's Leather Armor are more than decent. They even have special effects that protect unguarded areas—these are legendary equips.

"I can't see anything! What's going on?!" Gruszka cried.

With Fresa and Datil's super equips, there was no worry of them being decapitated in the first place. Man, I feel like I wasted energy worrying over them.

"It's dark! Help me! Help!"

So our only problem is that guy over there, screaming and crying.

"Look, Fresa-san! Your rotten luck saved this two-bit villain's life," Datil said.

"Hey, don't say it like that!" she said with a pout.

On top of Gruszka's head was the large pot that Fresa had pulled from the

Hoard Lottery. It went down to his shoulders, protecting his neck area.

“What is this?! Help! I can’t see!” Gruszka yelled.

It’s a bit dented from that decapitation attempt, but it’ll still be useful for cooking. Grida, could you please collect it?

“Okay!”

Now then. It took a bit to fully analyze the item, but it seems like Fresa’s mantle has finally activated.

“After deliberation, it has been confirmed that a physical slicing attack has been aimed toward the user. A lightning counterattack will be fired.”

We heard a cracking sound and were surrounded by a bright light. **Squeak!** “S-S-System...d-d-dowwwwn.” **Beep!** “Systeeeeeemmmm...” **Creak! Boom!**

The once blank room was suddenly charred and black—it was a shocking sight. Thanks to the change in color, we could now see the once-invisible seams in the wall as smoke billowed from the burned surface. Perkunas’s Mantle fired lightning bolts equivalent to the opponent’s evil intentions. *Since she was almost decapitated, I’d say the intentions were pretty malicious. A large lightning bolt is probably a fair trade here.*

“Datil, look! The door’s opening!” Fresa said. The lightning bolt must have unlocked the door, as the tightly shut exit was now wide open.

“That was easier than I expected,” Datil said.

“Heeey, don’t be so breezy about it! Look at all the people in here that couldn’t find an exit and starved to death!”

The room was filled with corpses. Those that survived the initial decapitation probably tried to do whatever they could to escape, only to die in despair. *Fresa’s right. This isn’t something we should just hand-wave away.*

“You’re right. Apologies for my comment.”

We were just very lucky.

“We’re able to leave this room because I rolled this mantle in the lottery, okay?” Fresa said proudly.

You just wanted to brag?! For a moment, I had a better opinion of you, but

you're making me retract it a few seconds later! I've never had to do this before!

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Datil said, with a tired look on his face. "You're amazing. Thanks."

"Wh-What are we dawdling for?! Let's leave this place immediately!" Gruszka said, shakily looking around.

"Hey! You're still alive thanks to the pot that I pulled earlier, okay? You should be more gracious toward me!" Fresa said.

"A pot? What are you talking about?"

I mean, the pot was suddenly on his head, and just as suddenly gone. I doubt he has a clue of what went on.

"Besides, just who *are* you lot, anyway?!" he said.

"We've said it before. We're just normal Rank E adventurers," Datil replied while Fresa giggled behind him. Gruszka narrowed his eyes with suspicion.

"Now then, shall we go, Fresa-san?"

"I don't mind, but the bandit chief here seems to be a bit of a scaredy-cat," Fresa said.

"Hmph! Say as you will. You guys are the strange ones here!" Gruszka said.

He's not wrong. It's pretty abnormal for you guys to be talking like normal in this situation.

"Oh, strange, you say? That's a bit rude of you, isn't it? We can leave you here, if you'd like," Datil said. Gruszka gulped and fell silent.

As Datil and Fresa chuckled to each other, looking at the now silent Gruszka following close behind them, they decided to leave the room. Datil stood in the front with a lantern in hand. Fresa was behind him, and Gruszka, still nervously glancing around, brought up the rear.

"There's only one path to take. Not much of a labyrinth, is it?" Datil said. We went deeper down the dark hallway.

This Gaokerena Palace is very cleanly built. It feels like it's not of this world.

"These walls are made out of an odd material, right, Datil?" The hallways felt

strangely modern in terms of architecture. It felt as though we were in a science fiction novel.

“Yes. This isn’t wood, stone, or steel.”

Like the walls in the room we’d just left, there were no visible seams. As the lantern lit up the hallways, they glowed back with a pale and mysterious blue light. The walls and ceilings were covered in uniform patterns, pointing even further to the fact that these were man-made.

“I don’t see anything. Do you?” Fresa asked.

“There’s no demons or traps,” Datil replied.

As a side note, there weren’t any announcements either. The silence was a little unnerving.

“Datil, do you think this area is a safe space, or something?”

No. That’s unfortunately not the case, Fresa, because...

“Absolutely not! Do you not remember what I said about my subordinate?! It’s very dangerous!” Gruszka said behind us.

Exactly. Gruszka told us that the only person that came out of this labyrinth was on the verge of dying.

“If we’re talking purely in terms of fighting abilities, my subordinate’s skills surpassed mine.”

In other words, there’s something in here that would leave a capable warrior on the verge of death.

“So there *are* demons or traps then?” Datil said.

“Could be. Let’s stay cautious,” Fresa said.

Let’s not forget the large tree at the end of the labyrinth that they apparently saw. The truth lies deeper inside.

The path’s split into two.

“Furutsu, we’re the only ones that can see that,” Grida said.

Right. We see a T-junction here, with the roads split to the right and left. The other three only see the path to the right.

“Fresa-san, we’re safe. Nothing’s here,” Datil said, as he put his back against the wall of the right path. He slowly peeked down the end of the hallway.

Since this is an L-shaped path to him, this is theoretically the correct way to confirm his surroundings. But since we can see the left path, he looks wide open to an attack from behind.

“The left path looks like it’s blocked off by a wall to them,” Grida said.

Yeah. It’s odd, but I think you’re correct. We can see this wall too, but it’s so faint that it’s almost transparent. Of course, the others aren’t able to hear the announcement we’ve been hearing as well.

Ring! Ding! “Welcome to Gaokerena Palace. The Audience Room is to your right. If you would like to go to the Nursery, please proceed to your left.”

Wait, isn’t the Audience Room the place where the king usually is? And he says something like, “I have been expecting you. Please defeat the Demon Lord.” So this palace has a room to meet the king? If that’s the case...

“Do you think we could meet the World Tree?” Grida asked.

Maybe. I think Gruszka’s subordinate didn’t see the left path either, and headed to the right, where they saw the large tree.

“Yay! Then let’s go right!”

Wait. I’m a bit curious about the left path actually.

“Huh?”

Only we can see this path. What lies in the Nursery? Normal humans wouldn’t go this way, so Gruszka’s subordinate probably went down the right path, where they were mortally wounded and died at the exit. I hopped off Fresa’s hands and rolled to the left.

“Huh? Apple-san, where are you going?” Fresa said.

Even if something dangerous was lurking beyond this invisible wall, I’m sure Datil and Fresa could handle it. Uh, no guarantees for Gruszka though. I

proceeded toward the left path.

“Hey, that’s a wall!” Datil said with surprise. He chased after me and gently put his hand against the wall. However, as there was nothing physical there, it went straight through.

“Huh?! What’s going on, Datil?!” Fresa exclaimed as she followed him over.

“Ack! Hey, d-don’t leave me behind!” Gruszka cried, running toward the left path as well.

“How is this possible?! Look, we can pass through this wall!” Datil said as he put his hand on the illusion.

From my point of view, it just looks like you have your hand in the air.

“How interesting!” Fresa said.

Now’s not the time to be excited. I just heard a new announcement.

Ring! Ding! “All weapons will be confiscated here. Please immediately place your weapons, armor, and any other dangerous items on the ground. Should you proceed while equipped, you will be treated as a trespasser and will be removed immediately.” **Ring! Ding!** “I repeat, please immediately place your weapons, armor, and any other dangerous items on the ground...”

Now wait just a second. There’s no way we can just get rid of all our weapons in this dangerous place! Besides, only Grida and I can hear these announcements! How can I explain to them that they should drop all of their dangerous items?

Ring! Ding! “Warning! Please place all of your weapons and armor on the ground, or turn back.” **Ring! Ding!** “Warning! Warning! It is prohibited to proceed any farther with your weapons!” **Ring! Ding!** “Warning! Warning! Warning! Please do not proceed any farther. You will be risking your life!” The announcements had steadily grown more urgent. But of course, there was no way to stop the three that couldn’t hear them.

Beep! Beep! “Confirmed [3] trespassers. We will prepare our gatekeeper.”

So we’re finally trespassers. But there’s no use warning people if they can’t hear your announcements.

Beep! Beep! “Creating gatekeeper. There are [3] trespassers. Creating gatekeeper. There are [3] trespassers.”

Creating?

Beep! Beep! “Gatekeeper has been created. Trespassers have been confirmed. Commencing removal.”

From the end of the dark hallway, a large shadow approached us.

“Fresa-san, something’s coming!” Datil warned.

“Is that...a human?” she asked.

No, it’s too large to be a human, and it also has this unusual smoothness to it. Is that the gatekeeper?

Creak. Creak. Creak.

“Huh?! It’s fast!” Datil yelled. In an instant, three enlarged mannequinesque beings, like the kind you’d see in department stores, stood right in front of him. In the next moment, a large booming sound echoed in the hallways, as he was blown backward down the hallway.

“Datil!” Fresa shouted.

He’s fine. It looked like he was blown back, but he definitely jumped back of his own accord. But I can’t believe he had to retreat there! He left Fresa and Gruszka behind.

“I’m fine. Please be careful! I had planned to lure them all, but one is headed straight toward you! These things are really strong!” Datil yelled.

Creak. Creak. Creak.

I see. I’ve heard that experienced fighters can use space to direct an opponent’s attention as they please. He had jumped back to goad the three mannequins into chasing him. But as he says, these things are strong. That speed was on par with the queen ant.

“Eek! It’s coming!” Gruszka cried, hiding behind Fresa.

Come on, at least act like you're gonna fight. Whoops, I shouldn't be so laid-back myself. I'll help! This place might not work either, but let me give it a shot. One hundred percent, unchain...

Beep! Beep! “Detected magic manipulation. Activating Antiphase Field. Magic will be neutralized and nullified.”

...the wind, entreat the moon.

Ding! “The spell is incomplete. Please recite the full spell to activate magic.”

Ugh, dang it. I guess I can't use magic here either.

“Furutsu, what should we do?” Grida asked.

Can't help it. Worst case, I'll try to tackle this thing. Let's watch Fresa fight for now.

“Ahhh! I-It's creepy! What is that?!” Gruszka yelled.

“Hey! It's dangerous, so stand back! Activate King of Apples!” Fresa said.

Ding! “King of Apples has been activated. Please ensure that others are a safe distance away. Activating in: 10...9... You will feel a strong shock wave, please stand back. 3...2...1...”

Five apples floated around her. “Harden. High-speed rotation.”

Ding! “All apples will be hardened and be applied with high-speed rotation. 3...2...1... Upgrade complete.”

The floating apples started to rotate with extreme speed. The gatekeeper cautiously slowed down as it closed the gap. **Creak. Creak.**

“You guys are smart too? You have a good eye,” Fresa said.

How are these mannequin gatekeepers sensing anything at all? They don't have eyes, mouths, or ears.

“Furutsu, those aren't alive. They're not animals or plants,” Grida said.

Oh, makes sense. The announcement also said they were “creating” these gatekeepers, so I guess they're just dolls that automatically fight or something. It looks like they made one for each trespasser.

“Eek! Get away! Stay back!” Gruszka yelled.

Upon closer inspection, it does look like the gatekeeper’s aiming for Gruszka. I mean, he looks absolutely terrified while he’s fleeing. I’d want to punch him once too.

“N-No! Ack! Ow!” Gruszka had tripped over his own feet.

Now’s your chance, go! Wait, I shouldn’t be rooting for the gatekeepers, should I?

Creak. Creak. Creak.

Gruszka screamed as the gatekeeper lurched around oddly, heading straight toward him.

“Raaah!” With a roar, Datil’s sword cut through it.

That was close. The mannequin was sliced in two at its stomach, and it sprayed a mysterious, bouncy material. Its upper half lay at our feet, while the bottom rolled to a stop near the wall.

“Apologies for the wait. Are you all okay?” Datil said.

“Hey! We didn’t wait at all! What should I do with all these apples?!” Fresa said, sounding frustrated but with a smile on her face. At the end of the hallway were the other two gatekeepers, sliced into shreds. *As always, you work fast!*

“Whew. I-I’m okay,” Gruszka said, shakily standing up as he wiped sweat off his brow.

Man, you’re really just dead weight. Why did you come here in the first place? Oh wait, I’m the one that dragged you here with my shackles.

Creak. Creak. Creak. Suddenly, the upper half of the closest mannequin grabbed Datil’s ankles. *This thing can still move?!*

Datil cried in pain as we heard crushing sounds. Loga’s Leather Armor didn’t protect his ankles.

“Datil?!” Fresa yelled.

“I-I’m fine. Take care of those guys over there!” he said, pointing his sword

toward the two other gatekeepers that had been sliced to shreds.

Those guys can seriously still move too?! They're hacked into tiny pieces!

"Got it! Explode. Incinerate."

Ding! "All apples will explode with an incinerating effect. 3...2...1... Upgrade complete." At once, the apples around Fresa stopped rotating. The ends of their stems glowed with tiny sparks of fire.

Crack! Datil used his sword to sever the wrist of the mannequin that had grabbed onto him. He kicked the ground, gaining a safe distance between himself and the doll. His ankle was firmly imprinted with the mannequin's hand, as drops of blood rolled down his foot. *Those things are really strong!*

"Datil...I'll never forgive these guys! Apple Meteor!" Fresa yelled, her voice bouncing around the hallways. The apples whooshed as they headed straight toward the lurching mannequins. The light from the explosions illuminated the area. In the next moment, the entrance was engulfed by a big fire.

I understand your anger, but this is going a bit too far, Fresa.

"Eek! Why are apples exploding?!" Gruszka said, wide-eyed.

That's actually a fair point. I wish she wouldn't go overboard with her moves—people will get a bad impression of apples.

"Actually, you're to blame for that, aren't you?" Grida asked.

I'm deeply sorry.

Grida giggled. "As long as you understand. Just kidding!" After a brief pause, she screamed. "That's so gross!"

What's going on? I'm not gross.

"No, look at that thing over there! Look!"

Huh? What? Oh...ew! Yeah, that's gross! The hand that Datil had severed earlier was scuttling around on its own. The upper body, now handless, was also slowly moving.

"I slashed that thing to pieces, but it can still move?!" Datil said.

The hand, upper body, and lower body all moved in a grotesque way, ready to

pounce.

“I guess I need to grind them into dust. Cell Manipulation!”

Ding! “Cell Manipulation has been activated. Remaining time: 59...58...57...”

“The blue dragon is always by our side! Blue Dragon Sword: Rain!” Blue light started to gather toward Datil’s sword. In the next moment, drops of water started falling from above.

What? Rain?! We’re indoors! As the sound of rain grew louder, the gatekeepers began to crumble. *Can each of these droplets slice through them?!* Before long the rain stopped, and not a trace remained of the gatekeepers.

“Th-That move was amazing...” Gruszka said with awe, unable to hide his shock.

“Datil, how’s your leg?” Fresa asked, jogging toward him.

Datil smiled back. “I’m fine, look!” His leg was slowly returning to its original state.

“This...isn’t magic, is it?”

“No, I think this is the Pseudo-blessing ability that I got from Apple-san back at the chasm.”

Judging from its name, it probably works similarly to the blessing card, allowing the user to fully heal, restore lost body parts, cure poison, regenerate mana, and stuff like that.

“Furutsu, what about the ‘nourishing, protecting, family, increased business sales, high academic achievements, and praying for a safe childbirth’ parts?” Grida asked.

Uh, we can ignore those.

“Really? Aw...”

Why do you sound disappointed? The healing speed is a lot slower than my blessing card, but it definitely allows the user to fully heal. His torn ankle is totally recovered.

“Huh?! A-Are you an undead?!” Gruszka yelled as he trembled.

Is shaking like a leaf your character quirk or something now?

“Datil, I think he thinks you’re some sort of Nosferatu,” Fresa said.

“Well, I might as well be an undead. With these regenerative capabilities, I won’t die so easily.”

The two whispered to each other, giggling. *Come on, let’s not go too far. Gruszka’s getting paler by the second.*

Chapter 4: The Large Tree in the Sky

We'd passed through a corridor hidden by an illusory wall, survived the hallway that prohibited our weapons, and bested the powerful gatekeepers specially designed for intruders. We'd reached the depths of the labyrinth, an area that no normal human could even hope to reach. *What's so special about the Nursery that's so tightly guarded beyond this door?*

"Fresa-san, Apple-san, I'm gonna open the door," Datil said.

"Go for it," she replied.

Thump...

Datil pushed on the door, it suddenly disappeared, and...

"H-Huh?! Whaaat?! What's going on?" Fresa screamed.

We now found the door, closed, behind us. *What's going on here?*

"I'm not sure. When did we go through? I didn't even hear it close shut!" Datil said.

"Th-This place gives me the creeps! Let's hurry up and get out of here!" Gruszka yelped.

With puzzled looks on their faces, the three proceeded down the hallway. After a short while, we saw a bright light at the end of the passage.

"Huh?! Are we...outside of the labyrinth?" Datil said.

"But we should be in the desert!" Fresa replied.

"W-We did it! We made it out!" Gruszka crowed.

A blue sky, grassy meadow, flowing river, and trees swaying in the wind appeared in front of us. *For a split second, I thought we made it outside too—but that's not it!*

"Can you tell, Furutsu?" Grida asked.

Yeah. This is all fake, isn't it?

“Every part of it is creeping me out.”

I agree. The wind blowing in our faces is so unnerving that I just want to get out of here.

“Seems like we made it out,” Datil said.

“The wind feels great!” Fresa exclaimed.

I guess you two haven’t realized how clearly off-putting this is. Is this the Nursery then?

“Yay, we’re outside! We made it!” Gruszka said, running off in joy.

“Wait up! Do you not understand your position here?” Datil said, chasing after him.

“Datil! Wait!” Fresa said sharply. Datil turned around at once, but Gruszka wasn’t even listening.

Gruszka’s still running and running and...oh, he tripped.

“What’s wrong, Fresa-san?”

“Apple-san seems to be on edge.”

You’re as observant as always. I have no idea how you can tell, but you’re right; Grida and I are on high alert. This place is filled with malicious intent. So much so that “creepy vibes” don’t even begin to describe what I’m feeling here.

“Apple-san, what’s the matter? Is something wrong with this place?” Datil asked.

I don’t know. But I do understand that it’s supposed to have some special meaning. If it didn’t, we wouldn’t have been forced to remove all our weapons, much less been greeted by those powerful gatekeepers.

“Furutsu, be careful! Someone’s coming!” Grida said. Surprised, I glanced around.

When did he run that far? Gruszka was already a good distance away, and in front of him was a man and a woman. *There’s people here?!*

“Fresa-san, are those the things we just defeated?!”

“We can’t make it in time from this distance!”

Great, you two noticed. But even though you guys have boosted abilities, it seems like you can’t see clearly from that far away. They’re obviously humans, and Gruszka’s talking with them.

“I’ll go first. Cell Manipulation!”

“Be careful, okay?”

Datil ran toward Gruszka as fast as he could. *You say mean things, but you’re really nice after all.*

“Apple-san, we should go too!” Fresa said, and she took off in pursuit.

Datil’s already next to Gruszka and he...sheathed his sword? So they aren’t enemies after all.

“Whew, I guess we’re safe,” Fresa said, realizing the change in the air. We slowed down and approached the group.

“I see, you came from that door! You must have been through quite a lot.”

“I simply cannot believe humans would emerge from that door!”

It seemed like Datil and Gruszka were mid-conversation with the two strangers.

“My name is Okhar. I’m the leader of Rhuvae Village,” the man said.

“I’m his wife, Noix. Welcome.” The couple smiled at us.

“Rhuvae? That name doesn’t ring a bell at all. What’s the name of the closest town from here?” Gruszka asked.

“Pardon?”

“Closest...town?”

The couple looked at each other in confusion before both cocking their heads to the side. “We don’t quite understand your question. What is a ‘town’?”

...Huh?

“Ummm, like, don’t travelers or merchants come to your village?” Fresa asked.

“Travel? Traveling merchants?”

It seems they're not understanding Fresa either.

“My husband and I haven't seen any other humans aside from the residents of our village. Are there more people beyond that door?” Noix asked.

What? This is starting to sound a bit complicated.

“That's not good! We must hurry and bring them in here! How many people are outside? Two? Three? You will all be safe here. We have ample food and work available,” Okhar said.

“Wait just a second. What are you guys talking about? You haven't interacted with anyone else outside of your village?” Gruszka said. “At a glance, this land seems to be surrounded by several mountains.”

The couple looked at each other with doubt.

“Your words don't make sense to me. Rhuvae Village is the only thing in this world,” Okhar said.

“This is a place of paradise created by our god, the Great Gaokerena. Only chaos and darkness rule beyond that door—it's Hell. Are you not those who were left behind, unable to be saved by our lord and lost to Hell? You're the descendants of the abandoned, who managed to survive in their good fortune. Are we wrong?” Noix said, lowering her voice.

We've heard that name, Gaokerena, a countless number of times before we got here. That might be the owner of this labyrinth, and the World Tree. But what do they mean by “abandoned”?

“A long time ago, the world was Hell, ruled by chaos and darkness, overflowing with demons. To save the humans who had to live alongside fear, despair, and meaningless death, the Great Gaokerena created this paradise of Rhuvae Village,” Okhar said.

“It's said that the Great Gaokerena then sent their messengers to Hell, hoping to lead people to this paradise,” Noix said.

“As far as I know, none have been led here in decades. I had thought that the abandoned citizens had all perished.”

I see. Messengers leading people... I think I'm getting an idea.

"In any case, I'm rather surprised that you've retained your memories from Hell. If I recall, the abandoned have their memories of suffering and sadness erased, and are forced to cast aside any items used for combat before being led here."

"Oh, you're right; this situation *is* odd. You don't seem to have any messengers with you either," Noix said.

I get it now. It's starting to make sense.

"It is?" Grida asked.

Remember those announcements in the labyrinth? Only we could hear them. No normal human could get here anyway.

"Yeah. Everyone would've probably died in the very first room."

If, by any stroke of luck, they managed to make it out of that room, they definitely wouldn't have noticed the invisible wall. That means there were originally guides to lead us here.

"I see! So that must've been what the messengers were for!"

Exactly. Very good, Grida. These messengers are most likely beings that led people here, "saving" them from "Hell," and were able to hear those announcements. They confiscated people's weapons and armor and wiped their memories along the way.

"But Furutsu, why would they do that?"

I'm not sure. There's a possibility that they really believed that they were saving people from Hell. At a glance, this place seems very peaceful, and the outside world's Hell, teeming with evil demons and dangerous parasitic creatures.

"Hey, Datil. Do you think this place is...?"

"Yeah, this is a village inside of the labyrinth. These people are living here without ever having contact with the outside world."

Seems like Fresa and Datil caught on.

“This is the center of Rhuvae Village, the residential area,” Okhar said.

“My, my! It’s a much larger village than I’d imagined!” Gruszka looked around happily.

You’re not thinking of anything nefarious, are you?

Okhar laughed. “There’s around one hundred people living here. It’s very lively.”

“Oho? How wonderful!”

Stop licking your lips! You’re definitely up to no good, aren’t you?

“Over here!” Okhar said, leading the way.

In the center of the village square was a scaffold of some sort, reminiscent of the building we saw at the campsite. *This probably isn’t used for fighting, but for...*

“Today is our annual festival!”

I knew it. I feel like I’ve seen one of these at my neighborhood festivals.

“This year’s sacrifice for the Great Gaokerena will be chosen tonight. We must hurry—it may just be you!”

Will you look at that! The Great Gaokerena is one hundred percent a devil! Change the current BGM from a relaxed country theme to a hype final boss battle theme! Hurry!

Gruszka gave a forced laugh. “A s-s-sacrifice, you say? Ha ha, I sure do enjoy your jokes!”

Okhar laughed in response, and Gruszka seemed a little relieved. *Hey now, it’s a bit too soon for you to feel at ease. Okhar isn’t kidding; he’s serious about the sacrifice bit.*

“What are the odds we’d arrive on the day of the festival? I feel rather bad—it almost looks like we aimed for today specifically!” Gruszka said.

“Ha ha, everyone has equal rights here... There’s no need to have any reservations,” Okhar muttered. Gruszka, who perhaps didn’t hear a word of it, was all smiles.

I heard you loud and clear though. Rights? Do you seriously think that being sacrificed is a “happy occasion” and “full of honor” or something?

“Come on in! This is my house!” he said, standing in front of a large log building. He opened the door and guided us in. “Hey, you all! We’ve got guests!”

Three boys and a girl quickly ran out to greet us.

“Welcome back, Mom, Dad!”

“Guests?! Welcome!”

“Huh? You came from that door? That’s amazing!”

It got pretty lively, huh? What a warm reception.

“Hey, they’re tired, all right?” Noix scolded her kids. At once the girl fell silent and happily sat on her mother’s lap.

“You guys sure have a lot of kids! Oh, please don’t eat this apple, okay?” Fresa said. Two of the boys grabbed her arms, and she seemed to be having fun. I was being toyed with by the other boy, who rolled me around.

Argh...

“Not at all. We actually have fewer children when compared to others.”

“Our neighbor gave birth to her sixteenth just yesterday.”

Sixteen?! Wait, is that the norm in this world?

“Wonderful! That’s a lot of children,” Datil said, sounding surprised.

Seems like it’s not.

“How very joyous! But if it’s her sixteenth child, she must’ve given birth at quite a mature age,” Gruszka said.

Yeah. If she were to give birth to one child a year, that’d still take sixteen years. I’m not sure if it takes about a year for a full pregnancy term in this world though. I don’t even know how many days are in a year here.

“Mature age? Uh, Noix, how old was she again?” Okhar asked.

“Not too old, I believe. She was a year or two younger than me.” They both

looked confused, and neither seemed to be lying.

She's younger than Noix and has had sixteen children?

"Datil, do you think these kids...?" Fresa said.

"Yeah, they don't seem to differ in age very much. Okhar, are they perhaps quadruplets?" Datil asked.

They're all about the same height, but really?

"Yes, that's correct," Noix replied, lowering her voice. She seemed to look a little troubled.

"We may not have many, but we'll definitely raise our children to be the best offerings they can to the Great Gaokerena!" Okhar chimed in hastily, as though to protect his wife.

The Great Gaokerena again? And how does he figure this isn't "that many" of them?

"Our next-door neighbor gave birth to eight children again. As the wife of the village's leader, it's a shame that I can only give birth to four. I don't know what to say to the village," Noix said, her shoulders slumped.

Okhar comforted his wife. "Noix, this is all part of the Great Gaokerena's plan. We each have our own roles. I'm sure of it."

Gruszka was at a loss for words as he gazed at the children. Fresa and Datil looked at each other with confused and troubled expressions.

"Fresa-san, have you ever heard of octuplets?"

"No way! That's, like, unheard of!"

It sounds like octuplets are extremely rare in this world too, but is it normal in this village?

The girl who was quietly sitting on Noix's lap ran over to Okhar with a smile. "Hey, Dad! Is it the festival yet?"

"Oh, it's about time. Everyone, let's go to the village square."

As we approached the square, the sun had started to set and it was slowly beginning to get dark.

“But Furutsu, the sky and the sun are...” Grida said.

Yeah. They’re fake. Everything in this village is fake, and it creeps me out.
Surrounding the scaffold were oddly designed lights hanging on trees.

“I’ll gather everyone, so please wait here,” Okhar said. He left us behind and approached the villagers who were working at the square.

“It has been a long time since anyone came from that door,” Noix said. “It’s a first for many of our villagers to meet guests from beyond. I’m sure everyone will be very happy!” Her children were fooling around nearby.

It’s a very peaceful sight, but who is this Gaokerena that seems to control this village?

“I apologize for the wait. Over here!” Okhar called.

Fresa, Datil, and Gruszka lined up in front of the scaffold in the square. Villagers crowded toward them with warm smiles.

“It seems there aren’t many young people, oddly enough,” Datil said to Fresa.

“Yeah. If the story about the octuplets was true, there should be more than this.”

Okhar laughed behind us. “But of course! Children are usually chosen as the sacrifices.” He smiled.

That’s not funny at all! What do you mean?!

“Pardon me, did I just mishear you? You use, uh, children for your sacrifice?” Gruszka asked in shock.

“Indeed! The Great Gaokerena chooses twenty children and five adults every year!” Okhar replied happily.

Wait, it’s not just a single person?!

“Whaaat?! There’s twenty-five sacrifices each year in a village of like one hundred people?!” Fresa said.

“That doesn’t add up. The whole village should be gone by now,” Datil said.

He and Fresa were visibly confused.

“Not at all!” Okhar replied matter-of-factly. “In Rhuvae Village, around thirty children are born each year! This is all by the wishes of the Great Gaokerena!”

How does that make any sort of sense? They lose almost as many kids as they have every year!

“Now, please don’t hold back. Today’s the festival.”

A village woman brought out food. She seemed very peaceful and happy, even though she might be chosen as a sacrifice only moments later.

Fresa and Datil were whispering to each other. “Datil...this village and its people are giving me the creeps!”

“I agree. They don’t seem normal at all.”

*Thirderd. They’re all very **ab**normal—why are they all happy to be sacrificed? The birth rate is abnormal too... Oh. I think I get what’s going on.*

“You do, Furutsu?” Grida asked.

Gaokerena must be doing something that keeps the birth rate above the sacrifice rate.

“Huh? Is that even possible?!”

Who knows? I truly don’t have a clue—but consider this, for instance.

“The food?”

The villagers had prepared a lot of luxurious food for Fresa and the others. *If there was something mixed in with their daily food and drinks... Grida, you felt something was off, didn’t you? The water and plants here are all unnatural. It feels very creepy, as though all these things were manufactured.*

“Yeah, I really don’t like it.”

If everything in this village is prepared by Gaokerena, they could do anything they want. It’s just like how humans provide livestock with altered feed or certain drugs.

“It has been confirmed that poisonous items have been aimed toward the user. A lightning counterattack will be fired.”

The villagers started to panic at the sound of a large crack. A lightning bolt had struck a bowl of soup that Fresa had reached for. *Wait, was that...?!*

“Fresa-san!” Datil said.

“Mmhmm. That was a counterattack from Perkunas’s Mantle.”

Sounds like there was something awful mixed in with the food, and it was bad enough that even the mantle reacted since it thought Fresa was gonna get hurt. Yeah, this is bad. This village is really bad.

“My word! What happened?! The bowl is...” one of the villagers said, looking at the burnt ground and the bowl that was shattered to tiny pieces.

“The lightning was small and it happened in a flash, so it looks like no one noticed, I think?” Fresa said.

“If your mantle fired a counterattack, that means...” Datil muttered.



Her mantle determined that the food was some sort of attack against the user and launched a counter.

“Yeah. Don’t eat anything, okay, Datil?”

“I know... Hey! You! Don’t eat that!” Datil said, hitting Gruszka’s hand. The chunk of meat he’d been holding fell back to the plate.

“Ow! Wh-What’s your problem?”

“Were you not paying attention?! Fresa’s mantle zapped some of the food! This stuff has something dangerous in it!”

Gruszka suddenly went pale and shrieked. “D-Do you mean it’s poisoned?!”

“Hmmm. If so, I think that lightning bolt would’ve been waaaaaay bigger,” Fresa said.

She’s right. That bolt was much smaller compared to the time she almost had her head lopped off.

Okhar had a big smile on his face as he grabbed the meat that Gruszka dropped moments earlier, and stuffed his cheeks happily. “Come, everyone! No need to hold back! Eat as much as you like!”

It’s probably not poisoned, and I also don’t feel any ill will coming from Okhar and the other villagers. But it’s clear that some kind of malicious intent is mixed in.

“It doesn’t seem poisonous, but if you two insist, I won’t eat anything. I’m not that brave,” Gruszka said. He calmly proceeded to pretend to eat. Like a magician, he used sleight of hand to hide the food elsewhere, or put it back onto the plate as he acted like he took a bite.

That’s the chief of the bandits for you.

“Wow, he’s really good,” Fresa said.

“He did undo the knots that I tied behind his back pretty easily,” Datil said.

The other two were less like magicians, and more like rakugoka, Japanese storytellers. With their usual acting skills, they pretended to shovel invisible food into their mouths and chewed with delight. *You guys are pretty good at*

this too.

“Yeah, it really looks like they’re eating! Amazing!” Grida paused. “Huh?”

Hm? What’s wrong, Grida?

“Furutsu, there’s a really long thread attached to these people’s heads. It’s coming from the sky. Can you see it?”

*Huh? Thread? No, I don’t think—wait, now that you mention it, I see it really faintly. What **is** this?*

“And it’s also above Fresa and the others.”

I see it now! It’s dangling about fifty centimeters above their heads, and moving in tandem with them too. That’s kinda creepy. Whoa! Look over there! The string is actually stuck to Gruszka’s head, just like how it is to the villagers!

“Huh?! Really? I’m sorry, I didn’t notice that!”

No need for you to apologize. I’m not accusing you of anything. Anyways, what do you think that is?

“Hmmm. I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s very good.”

Agreed. I have a bad feeling about this. I don’t really care about Gruszka, but I’m a little worried about Fresa and Datil.

“Look! It’s the Great Gaokerena! The Great Gaokerena is here!” a villager cried from the crowd. Immediately, everyone started to chant, “The Great Gaokerena!” at an amazing volume. It was hard to believe that there were only around a hundred or so people here.

This is less like a concert, and more like the kind of worshipping you’d hear at a shrine or temple. It’s loud, but in an orderly fashion—as though everyone is loudly reciting a sutra or praying, clinging to their precious god.

“Datil, look!”

“Yeah, seems like they’re finally going to make an appearance.”

An extremely large tree started to descend from high above. Its trunk was as large as a tower, and its leaves seemed to cover the sky. As it got closer to the ground, its roots started to blur and were difficult to see clearly.

“This must be what that lackey of Gruszka’s saw!”

I’m pretty sure this tree must be Gaokerena.

“Oh, our dear God!”

“Great Gaokerena! Please choose me for your sustenance!”

The villagers’ bloodshot eyes were aimed toward the sky, as they all begged to be chosen as the sacrifice. *They can’t be normal. Mob mentality? Brainwashing? I’ve heard that human minds can be manipulated rather easily in all sorts of ways, but...*

“Please! Please eat me and my family!”

Why do these people treat Gaokerena as a god, willing to sacrifice even their own children? I don’t understand. Is it because of their food? Or is it something else?

“Furutsu, look! The string!” Grida cried.

Will you look at that... The threads were connected to the villagers’ heads and all led back to that tree. *Is it using those to manipulate everyone?*

“Oh? I was wondering why my path would not connect, but I never imagined there would be guests. Is that the Fruit of Knowledge? How interesting,” said a booming voice.

It was so impressive and intense that it echoed in our stomachs. *I’m not sure where the stomach would be in an apple though.*

“Though perhaps not as impossible as I initially thought. You have committed a sin in the past and fallen to the depths below, but you are the descendant of a ruler, after all. Hm... Then it is not unusual that you could create your paths as well.”

Damn, I have no idea what it’s saying. What the heck does it mean by a “path”?

“Oh, so you do not? And yet you created these paths without any knowledge? How very interesting indeed.”

*You’re talking to **me**?!*

“Would I be conversing with another? Fruit of Knowledge, I ask you: just what are you? How are you able to maintain that Tree Spirit?”

I have no idea what you’re asking.

“I see. I have no inkling of how you have managed it, but you most certainly have a Tree Spirit, though you have fallen to the depths. A most unfortunate state of affairs.”

Huh?

“You must be eliminated. Only rulers are permitted to possess Tree Spirits.”

Excuse me?! All of a sudden, you want to “eliminate” me?! That doesn’t make sense. Besides, why are you acting all high and mighty like a god, you human-eater!

“You’re the one who is not making sense. Why are you objecting to plants eating animals?”

What are you talking about? I would think animals eat plants instead.

“Ah. You have a Tree Spirit and yet you are not informed of the truth. Certainly, odd things do occur in this world. Providing an explanation is rather troublesome, but...I do take pity on those that perish while lacking knowledge. I can provide some insight, I suppose. One thing is certain: your understanding is completely backward.”

Backward? What do you mean?

“Hmph, no matter. In any case, this is my Nursery. As I own these humans, I should be able to use them how I please.”

“Own” my butt. You can’t do something that selfish!

“What a waste of time this is. Is this not what a ‘ruler’ should be? How do you see me?”

Like an evil human-eating plant! Take this! Strength at one hundred percent; remove the shackles of fire, traveler!

Ding! “Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at one hundred percent.”
With a large whooshing sound, a huge fireball flew straight toward Gaokerena.

“Apple-san?! What the heck is going on?!”

“Hey, so is that thing actually an enemy?”

Fresa and Datil were surprised by my sudden attack, and the villagers were all crying with panic.

“Ack! Great Gaokerena!”

“It’s dangerous! Please flee!”

“Nooo! The Great Gaokerena!”

“Hm? Why are you using human magic? Do the wonders never cease?”
Gaokerena said.

Laugh while you can! Turn to ashes with my magic! Yes, a direct hit! But the moment the fireball hit Gaokerena, it disappeared into the air. Wait, huh?! Wh-What?! I definitely hit you! I didn’t even get a system announcement about you resisting it! What’s going on?!

“Well, well. You seem to take delight in creating a fuss. I hope you understand now. A ruler such as myself cannot possibly be harmed by physical attacks. Indeed, I lack a physical existence to begin with.”

My attacks seriously don’t work on him?! How do I fight?! The villagers breathed sighs of relief upon confirming Gaokerena’s safety, and started singing a prayer. Damn you! Now it looks like I’m the bad guy here!

“You truly are uninformed. If both sides have a Tree Spirit, the only way to battle is by connecting paths and stealing the other’s belongings. But of course, between the two of us, it would not be much of a battle to begin with.”

Well, excuse me for being uninformed! So let me ask, what do you mean by “paths”?

Gaokerena paused before continuing. “Do you see these narrow tubes that span from myself to these humans? These are called ‘paths.’ These are our roots, branches, and perhaps even our trunks.”

Those threadlike things are paths?

“You have connected some paths yourself. Though it is impossible for you to

see your own.”

What?! No way!

“It’s true! There’s something coming from Fresa-san and Datil-san’s heads, and they’re connected to you!” Grida said.

Seriously?! Wh-What?! When did I connect my paths to them?

“So you were unaware, it seems. I pity the ones that you leech. Using your paths, you have been sucking the essential life oil ‘dayquril’ from these humans’ souls.”

What?! I thought it was weird that I could move around without any food. I thought it was odd, but I never imagined I was receiving nutrients from them.

“Now then. Shall we begin? As I said earlier, those with Tree Spirits battle each other by connecting paths. The victor must dominate their opponent’s Tree Spirit.”

Bring it on! I’ll show you who’s boss!

“The key to this match is one’s mental fortitude—that is, the strength of one’s Tree Spirit.”

Great! I’m confident in that department! I’m nothing if not full of spirit!

“But you see, the more paths one creates, and the more dayquril one absorbs, the more one will be at an advantage. Let us compare, shall we? I have accumulated energy for a very long time at this Nursery, and you have created just two paths. It is clear who the victor will be.”

Shut up! Stop with the theatrics and just tell me how to connect these paths!

Gaokerena laughed. “Hah, you fool! I find it hard to believe that you are a descendant of the Fruit of Knowledge. How did you connect your paths with those two?”

I don’t know. I guess I made the connections without knowing. Besides, had I known I was gonna absorb their life force energy, I never would’ve created a path with them.

“I do not understand why you protect humans so much. Hmmm, well,

perhaps I do. The Tree of Knowledge was brought down for precisely the same reason.”

I really don't care about stuff like that. Just hurry and explain.

There was a brief moment of silence. “You are reckless and uninformed, but no matter. Your insolence will be punished with your eventual death. You are a fruit, are you not? To create a path, you should imagine yourself creating one from the seed.”

Seeds, you say? I never even thought about where my seeds are.

“Good luck, Furutsu!” Grida said.

Thanks! I've got this! So basically, I just need to be conscious of all my cells, right? Ah! Found it! All I need to do now is to stretch this thread from my seed. It goes through my stem, past it, and then outside!

“Very good. Now I shall absorb you, Tree Spirit dwarf, and your weak dayquril in an instant,” Gaokerena said. A white thread fell from the sky and stopped just above me.

“It's connected with your string,” Grida said.

Gotcha. I can't see my own, but I can feel it. My path is connected with Gaokerena now.

Where am I? Everything around me went dark. I can't sense Fresa, Datil, or any of the villagers. I can only see this thick white rope near my feet, and...

“Who's there?” I said.

At the end of the rope was a middle-aged man. He was tall and muscular, wrapped in a white garment. It was as though he came straight out of a mythology book. “Is it not obvious? I am Gaokerena.”

“What?! Why do you look like a human? Also, I can talk!”

“I do not look like a human. I merely created an item that resembles one. Hmph, it matters not. Let us begin our battle.”

Gaokerena picked up the rope by my feet. *Wait, what?! Whoa! I have legs!*

And hands! And a face!

“What are you dawdling for? Pick up the path,” Gaokerena said.

“This...is a path?!” *I just thought it was a thick white rope! What do I do with this?* I obediently picked it up with both hands.



“I have paths connected with ninety-seven people,” Gaokerena said, as numerous human shadows slowly started to emerge behind him.

Are those the villagers from Rhuvae?! In the very front were Okhar and Noix. Behind them were their four children. A long line of people continued behind the family—men and women of all ages picked up the path. Huh, they all grabbed the rope with no problems. I figured it'd be harder for the taller or shorter folks.

Gaokerena chuckled. “Do you see that thing at the very end of the path?”

Huh? An enormous black and red lump loomed at the path's end.

“That is the dayquril that I absorbed from these people, you see. It is quite heavy.”

Wait, heavy? I mean, that makes sense, I guess. It's about as big as a small mountain.

“And you only connected your path with two people.”

People started to emerge from behind me as well—Fresa and Datil.

“And now, we each pull on this path.” As a whipping sound echoed in the air, a white line was drawn between us. “Whoever can pull their opponent to their side, past this white line, shall be ruled the victor.”

Isn't this tug-of-war?! Wait! We don't have enough people at all, but there's a different issue! “What's up with that lump behind you? What happens if either of us pull on it?” I asked, directing my attention to that huge mass of dayquril. *It'll probably slide toward me if I tug on it, but what happens if Gaokerena does?*

“No need to worry. Dayquril moves in tandem with the path. It will become an extra weight for you when you tug on it, but it will not affect me in the slightest. However,” he said with a smirk, “I can use my path at any time to absorb some of this dayquril and increase my power. In the unfathomable event that you prove to be a bit of trouble, I still doubt that I would need it.”

So it just helps you out big time. You already have close to a hundred people on your side, and you look really buff. In comparison, I'm... “Oh yeah! Why do I have arms and legs?!” *I have a mouth too! What does my face look like? Have I*

aged? I don't have a mirror, so I can't confirm.

“We are in a place called the ‘Theatrum.’ Any being that connects a path, be it beast or plant, will appear in a form similar to ours as they prepare for battle. Those are the rules of this place.”

Fresa, Datil, and the villagers were in their usual attire, and I was dressed in garb similar to Gaokerena's. Halfway through the line behind him, I spotted a familiar face wearing a vacant expression.

“Gruszka! You're on *his* side?!” I exclaimed.

“Whatever do you mean? I connected a path with him, so it is only natural that he is part of my forces.”

I mean, we weren't exactly on the same team to begin with, but it feels weird when he's so blatantly on the other side.

Gaokerena roared with laughter. “Well then, shall we begin?”

Damn, I'm at a complete disadvantage here! I've only got two people!

“Very well, humans. Pull!” he ordered. With a low groan, the villagers started to pull on the path. I could feel the weight in my hands as my path was slowly but surely getting yanked to the other side.

“Ugh, can't you at least say ‘Start!’ or something?!” I groaned. My hands were stuck to the path and I was unable to let go. I heard grunting and groaning behind me. Fresa and Datil were also pulling on the path, with similar vacant expressions.

“I can't lose here!” I pulled on the path as hard as possible, but I felt the sheer number of people overwhelm me. *Ugh, they're so strong!* Gaokerena was right—it seemed that my mental fortitude was bearing the brunt of the force. I felt like I was putting up a good fight considering the number disadvantage, but I was being slowly pulled forward, inch by inch.

“Oh? Having a spot of trouble? What happened to your feisty attitude?” Gaokerena scoffed.

“Shut up! The battle's just beginning!” *But I'm gonna lose at this rate.*

“Ha ha ha! I knew it! A mere creature like you, who simply happened to

receive a Tree Spirit and started to act like a former ruler, is no match for me! My sides are aching from laughter!”

He’s laughing! He’s showing off how relaxed he is! “Arghhh! Damn it! Stop making fun of me!” Upon closer inspection, I saw that he was barely holding on to the path at all. “Hey! You’re not even helping your own team!”

“Hmph, is there a reason for me to participate myself? Now, humans! Drag that fool’s Tree Spirit onto our side!”

The groans grew louder and I started to hear screams as the villagers pulled on the path even harder. I was trying to hold my ground, but I felt myself being pulled forward. *Oh, this is so not good!*

Suddenly, a familiar voice rang out from within the line of villagers. “Everyone! Please stop this!”

This voice...

“Those people are trying to save you! We can’t let this continue!” Gruszka cried, as he somehow managed to let go of the path.

Gruszka!

“You! How did you...?!” Gaokerena said with surprise.

“I only just regained my consciousness, but I’ve been listening in on your conversation! I’m not sure who you are or where you’re from, but those people over there have saved my life a countless number of times. I may not be of much help, but I’ll assist them as much as I can!” Gruszka went over to the nearest villager, put his hands on their shoulders, and tried desperately to shake them awake. “Wake up! You guys are all being fooled by that monster Gaokerena!”

The villagers didn’t stop pulling, but I did feel the tugging weaken. *Good job, Gruszka! Maybe you’re not so bad after all!*

“Wh-What is this?! Why can that human retain his consciousness in the Theatrum?!” Gaokerena said, wide-eyed. “You aberration! I cannot believe you are blatantly defying me while connected to my path! Take this!”

Gaokerena took one hand off the path and aimed it toward Gruszka.

Wait, you let go with one hand?! I mean, wait! “Gruszka, look out! Run!”

With a satisfied evil grin, Gaokerena muttered under his breath. “Varkha ad Martez.” In the next instant, a large flame emerged from his hand and shot straight toward Gruszka. “Those that have released the path from their grasp are no longer protected by the Theatrum, and can be burned by my flames. I suppose that fool shall receive the recompense he is due.”

“Watch out!” Gruszka yelled out as tried to block the flames with his hands, but shouted in pain as the fire enveloped him. Behind him were eight small children tugging on the path with vacant expressions.

“Did you protect those kids?!” I said.

Gruszka collapsed, faceup but unmoving.

“He protected the children? A futile effort. I said that those grasping the path would be unharmed by magic. Truly, a useless act,” Gaokerena said.

You were genuinely happy when you heard that there were sixteen kids being born, weren't you? “You know, he was undoubtedly an evil guy, but there was just something to him that made him hard to hate.” I would love to avenge you, but there's a clear difference in power here.

While the villagers had temporarily weakened thanks to Gruszka, they started tugging once more on Gaokerena's orders.

“That was rather surprising, but insignificant in the end. That traitor spent so much time with you that you tried to form a path with him before I attempted to connect him to mine.”

“Damn it! At this rate...”

“Ha. It would be wise of you to simply surrender. Or do you expect yet another miracle?”

A miracle, huh? I guess Gruszka regaining consciousness while connected to his path was nothing short of a miracle. Huh? If that were the case... “Then what about Fresa and Datil? They're still connected to my path.”

“Did you call, Apple-san?” a man's voice said behind me. I couldn't help but turn around to see Datil's smiling face.

“See, Datil? I told you so! Apple-san’s a good-looking guy!” Fresa said, smiling happily. Their faces were no longer vacant and lifeless.

“Let’s do this, Fresa-san!”

“I may not look it, but I’m, like, pretty strong!”

In the next moment, the path that was tugging me forward stopped.

“Oh, careful with your posture! You don’t want anyone looking down there, do you?”

“Heeey! I know that, you pervert!”

It’s...a miracle.

Datil grinned. “Hey, don’t worry. We’re right here by your side.”

Fresa apologetically winked at me. “We’re sorry for being late! I was unconscious for a bit there, but I got the general gist of the conversation.”

“I’m not really sure what you guys were talking about, but I assume we’re supposed to be pulling on this path, right?”

If this isn’t a miracle, what is? “Fresa, Datil...” I could tell that the rope was now being pulled in the opposite direction—I was no longer getting dragged forward one-sidedly.

“I-Impossible! How are these humans conscious as well?!” Gaokerena roared, staring wide-eyed at the two. He seemed more surprised by this than when Gruszka came to his senses.

“Is that strange old man—the god-ish fellow there—is he that big tree?” Datil asked.

“He’s surprisingly young. But really buff men are totally not my type,” Fresa said.

As I could hear the path growing even more taut, I felt it slowly moving toward me. “You guys are amazing!”

Datil laughed. “Look at them, with their vacant expressions! I could take on dozens of them at once without fear!”

As Gaokerena had said, this was a battle of mental fortitude. In this case,

Fresa and Datil, who'd regained consciousness, would never lose to these villagers.

"Awww, I just got to meet Apple-san in the flesh. I wanted to take some time to talk with you," Fresa said.

"I feel the same way. I never thought the day would come when we would get to talk to you, face-to-face. But it seems now isn't the time for that," Datil said.

Gaokerena had still not tugged on the path himself. We had no idea how strong he was, and we weren't going to let our guards down.

"What is the meaning of this?! Why are they...? You! Humans! What are you doing?! Pull harder!" Gaokerena ordered his villagers, half-panicked.

"Raaaah!" The villagers' grunts and groans turned into shrieks and screams, and the path stopped moving once more.

"Oh, they're pretty strong," Datil said.

"Hmmm, but they seem to be in pain," Fresa observed. Sure enough, the villagers all had pained expressions as they kept pulling.

"We're holding fast, but we're not gaining any ground either." It seemed our strengths had reached an equilibrium; the path refused to move.

"I'm sorry, you guys. I always seem to drag you all into dangerous situations," I apologized.

Datil laughed. "That goes both ways. If you're in a pinch, I'll be more than happy to help!"

"Me too! In fact, I'm totally in your debt!" Fresa said.

I could hear their kind words coming from behind me, and it warmed my heart.

"Thank you, guys."

"I'd like to thank you as well, Apple-san!"

"You're really nice, aren't youuu?"

The strained path started to creak. *I can feel our mental strength heightening! I feel so much stronger!*

“Gah! Where did you find this *power*?!” Gaokerena yelled in confusion.

Good, we clearly have the advantage now.

“How you humans regained consciousness in this Theatrum is a mystery to me. How interesting indeed!” A thudding sound echoed through the room.

“Eek! Th-That took me by surprise!” Fresa yelped.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Datil said.

They both proceeded to glance around, trying to find the source of the sound.

“Fresa, Datil, calm down! That was just the sound of Gaokerena firmly digging his heels into the ground!” I saw his arm muscles clearly grow in size and his veins started pulsating. *Is he finally gonna make a move?!*

“It seems the vast difference in numbers made no difference to you. Then I suppose I have no choice,” Gaokerena said coolly. “I shall personally provide you with your requiem.” As he started to pull, the tables suddenly flipped.

“I didn’t think he was *this* strong!”

All three of us were starting to get dragged forward. *Crap! I didn’t think we had this much of a difference in power!*

“Ugh... Apple-san, th-this is bad, isn’t it?” Datil said.

“I can’t believe it! Why’s he this strong?!” Fresa wailed.

The white line was slowly inching toward me.

“Okay, then how’s this? Cell Manipulation!” Datil yelled. He was only met with silence.

I can’t hear that familiar ding.

“Huh? That’s weird. Cell Manipulation!” Datil’s ability didn’t activate.

“Huh?! Wait, is it the same for me too? Activate King of Apples!” Fresa yelled. Like with Datil, nothing happened. No apples appeared, and the usual announcement didn’t come. “I can’t use my ability either!”

Does this place restrict the effects of the Cards of Fate?!

“Oh? Are you two attempting to activate some sort of special abilities?

Unfortunately, that is impossible here. Only rulers can use their abilities to the fullest extent.”

What’s with that rule?! First, explain what “rulers” are!

“Oho? Is that the extent of your power? Then I suppose this is the end for you then?”

Ugh, at this rate, we’re gonna lose! What can I do?!

“This battle is over. I shall connect you three to my path.”

Damn it! Nah, I think I’m good! Besides, there’s more than three people here. I’ve got Grida inside of me. I can’t end my journey here—I have to take her out of the storage card!

“One more pull to go, and your feet will be past that white line.”

Damn it! Am I just gonna break my promises?! I have to free Grida!

I heard a giggle. “Furutsu, you seem to be in trouble.” A cute young girl suddenly appeared in front of me. “But you get what you deserve. You forgot about me for a bit, didn’t you?” The girl raised her index finger and made an angry face, but she looked a little troubled too. “I knew it! You did forget about me! Then I don’t care anymore!” Almost in tears, she folded her arms in front of her and looked away.

“Huh?! Where did this girl come from?!” Fresa said.

“She’s dressed in the same attire as Apple-san and that big old tree man...” Datil said.

The girl was around twelve or thirteen years old, similar in age to Berry. She had glossy golden hair, pale skin, large round eyes, and as Datil had said, was wearing the same white clothing as me and Gaokerena.

“You forgot about me for a bit there, Furutsu. So it was awkward for me to come out!”

Wait, this voice is familiar. And she calls me “Furutsu.” Sh-She must be...!

“Is that you...Grida?”



She smiled shyly at me and giggled. “Jeez! Who else could it be, Furutsu?”

Seriously?! Why do you look like that?! Also, you’re really adorable! Huh, wait a second... I know this doesn’t make sense, but I have this odd feeling like I’ve seen you like this before...

“Oho? So you have connected your path to one more, have you? Let me see...” Gaokerena said, staring in my direction. “Hm. Your path is connected to your own insides. Who is that little girl? Were you keeping a little insect inside of your body?”

“Huh?! I’m not an insect!” Grida said.

*Erm, well, you **are** inside of an apple. What else would be there but a bug?*

“Hmph. It is of no consequence. A little girl like that will hardly make a difference in this match.”

She made a face at him. “A little girl?! You’re so rude! Furutsu, let’s beat that old man!” Grida proceeded to run toward the path, putting herself between Fresa and me, and grabbed it with one hand. There was a big boom, and the mountain of dayquril behind Gaokerena started to move.

“Gah! Wh-What?!” he yelled.

No way. Did Grida just do that?!

“Wh-What is this?! What did you do?! Agh!” The old man lost his balance for a moment before quickly regaining it, trying desperately to pull back. However, both he and his villagers were slowly being dragged toward me.

“I only tugged on it ever so slightly,” Grida replied with a huge smile on her face.

Gaokerena, his face red, pulled on the path with all his might, but it was a losing battle.

“Gah! I simply cannot believe this! How could something this absurd happen?!” He roared at his villagers. “Humans! Put more strength into it!”

The villagers started to scream and shout as they tugged on the path with all their might. Once more, it stopped moving. *You’re overworking those people!*

Grida giggled. “That old guy is so weak! I think I’ll finish my introduction first!”

Oh, so I guess you just stopped pulling, huh?

She switched her grip on the path as she turned around toward Fresa and Datil. “Hello! My name is Grida. I’m inside of Furutsu,” she said, only lightly grasping the creaking path. She had her back toward Gaokerena.

Jeez, she’s so strong...

“I’ve been watching you two this entire time you’ve been with him. I hope we can continue to be good friends,” she said, bowing her head. *Everything she does is adorable.*

“Wait, are you the one who’s always casting the stronger-looking magic?” Fresa asked.

Very astute as always, Fresa. How can you tell?!

“Wow! So you noticed me, Fresa-san?” Grida hopped happily without letting go of the path.

“Heh heh, I knew it! I kind of had a hunch. Pleased to meet you, Grida-chan!”

“Nice to meet you, Grida! I see, so Apple-san’s name is Furutsu!” Datil said.

Oh yeah, I guess I never gave them my name.

“Hm, what would you like me to call you? Furutsu-san... Furutsucchi... Calling you just Furutsu sounds a bit odd,” Datil said, cocking his head to one side.

“Yeah, I think I’ll stick with Apple-san.”

“Yeah, I will too!” Fresa said.

So we’re sticking with that, huh? Okay, no problemo. I already got used to that name anyway. “You can call me whatever you like. I hope Grida and I can stay as your friends!” They smiled back at me. I was glad that Grida seemed to be smiling happily too.

“You impudent humans!” Gaokerena roared, his face flushed an even deeper red from pulling as hard as he could.

Hey, where’s he get off being even redder than I am? I’m the apple here!

“What impressive nerve to act like that in front of a god, you inferior beings!”

Oh, sorry, cranky that we were ignoring you? Must be lonely being a god.

“Oops, I forgot about him,” Grida said.

“Aw, come on! Let’s, like, leave him be and talk for a bit more!” Fresa said.

“Yeah, seconded. We probably can’t talk to you two once we leave this weird room, right?” Datil said.

Whoa, you guys are quick to relax! Why’re you happily nodding along, Grida?! “Hey, guys, I totally agree with the ‘screw Gaokerena’ mindset, but don’t you feel sorry for the villagers?” I said. I’ve actually been a bit worried about them. We can’t just keep chatting away while they look like that.

“Furutsu, I just want to talk for a little bit more, okay?” Grida said.

“Hm. They do look like they’re being manipulated, but they’re our enemies, aren’t they? It doesn’t seem like they’ll die or anything,” Datil noted.

“Let’s just leave them beee! You’re too nice, Apple-san,” Fresa said.

You guys are a bit too harsh, no?

“I...” Gaokerena said.

Hm? Did someone say something? Oh wait, I forgot about you again, whoops. I faced forward and saw Gaokerena glaring at me, fuming with anger.

“I will not forgive you! I will not forgive any of you inferior beings! You shall pay the price for ridiculing me!” Gaokerena yelled, his shoulders trembling with rage. He roared, and there were disgusting popping noises as his huge muscles grew once more. “Huff... How many centuries has it been since I went all out? How vexing it is that I must go to these lengths against creatures like you! Should this decrease my life span, then so be it! I shall use all the dayquril I have saved to drag you all to your deaths!”

Before our eyes, the mountain of dayquril behind him began rapidly shrinking, and the man himself had transformed into a being that no longer resembled a human. *He’s more beast than man now.* I heard the shrieks of the people behind me.

“Ew! He looks so gross!”

“Wait! Isn’t that, like, totally unfair?”

“Whoa, he looks like a giant!”

I kinda feel like you guys are still way too relaxed, but whatever.

Gaokerena laughed. “Hah! This is the end for you!” He was around twice his previous size now—large hornlike appendages sprouted from his face, and his overly large muscles pulsated.

Is this his true form?

“I won’t even give you the luxury of time to feel despair.” As he put his strength into the rope, his muscular arms and legs bulged even more under his clothes, refusing to be contained.

“Whoa! This is bad!” Datil yelled.

“Nooo! He’s pulling us toward him!” Fresa cried.

The tables had completely turned, as he started pulling the path toward his side once more. *Ugh, he’s so strong!*

“For real?! I’ve never felt this sort of strength before!” I said.

“You’re right. I didn’t think he’d be this strong either...” Datil replied.

“Y-You guys! Don’t be so impressed!” Fresa cried.

If we let our guards down for even a second, this path is going straight to the other side. This isn’t good!

“Hm, so you aren’t as weak as I thought,” Grida said, glancing at Gaokerena. She’d seemed disinterested at first, but it looked like he’d gotten her attention.

“Do you tremble at my awesome power, little girl? I am afraid it is too late.”

“Did you call me a ‘little girl’ again?” Grida huffed and gently grabbed the path with both of her hands. “Then I guess I can show you just a teensy bit more of my power.” Without even digging her heels into the ground or bending her legs, Grida simply pulled on the path with her arms. “Hiyah!” Contrary to her adorable voice, the path creaked to a halt.

“Wh-What?! What is happening?!” Gaokerena’s face paled. He lowered his center of gravity as he tugged with all his strength, but the path refused to

budge. “Gaaah?! Wh-What is this strength?!”

“What’s wrong? I thought a little girl like me wasn’t worth your time.”

“Wh-Why?! Why is a being with this much strength connected to the Fruit of Knowledge?!”

“Look very closely. Your string with the villagers and my string with Furutsu are different.”

Excuse me? There’s different types of paths? I can’t see my own so I have no idea what it looks like. Gaokerena suspiciously looked in my direction before his face revealed his sudden panic.

“H-Huh?! I-Impossible!” he said. His face quickly turned from a shade of red to pale. *Kinda reminds me of a lamp going out.*

“Th-This is incomprehensible! How can a banished being have both a zain and a cuff?! How have you connected a high-ranking path that is not a mem?!”

I have absolutely zero clue what you’re saying! I recommend everyone here just let it in through one ear and out the other!

“Probably because *I* haven’t been banished,” Grida said with a smile. *God, even your smile’s adorable.*

“What in the world are you talking about, little girl?! This has nothing to do with...” Gaokerena trailed off as understanding flashed across his face. “What?! N-No! H-How can this be?!” He turned white as a sheet.

Looks like the weather’s overcast. Maybe I should bring my laundry in.

“M-Milady...! Wh-Why are you here?!” Gaokerena said, trembling.

Why does he suddenly look terrified?

Grida giggled. “I won’t forgive you, old man! Since you made me ‘grow,’ you must be prepared to take on your punishment!” Grida stuck her tongue out and whispered, “Just kidding.”

I don’t really get it, but don’t be too mean, all right? The guy’s crying and shaking his head viciously.

“H-Help me! I...I had no idea!” he mumbled, as tears and mucus ran down his

face. *Ugh, gross.*

“Grida, what’d you do to him? He’s all terrified now,” I asked.

“Huh? Can’t you tell?” she replied.

What? I can tell that he started acting weird once you mentioned that his path and my path were different kinds. “You said that Gaokerena and I had different paths. What’s so different about them?”

“Um, color? Oh, and aura! I can’t quite explain, but it’s totally different!”

Huh. Really. I can’t see my own path, so it’s not like I can tell.

“You...don’t know? Color? Aura?” Gaokerena said, looking up.

Was he listening in to our conversation?

“A-Are you a stray?!” he said, suddenly lively again. “Hah! Ha ha ha! Fantastic! You are not connected to the main body, are you?! I see now!” He had an evil smirk on his face once more.

What’s with you? One moment you’re crying, the next moment you’re laughing. You look super unstable.

“If you are just a simple stray, then this battle becomes winnable once more. Hah!” The dayquril behind Gaokerena completely disappeared. The villagers shrieked in agony, growing thinner and frailer by the second. Gaokerena panted. “Behold the full extent of my power!”

He absorbed the life force from the villagers to grow even larger! They were still alive, but it looked like all they could do was stand there.

“How awful,” Grida murmured sadly.

I agree, we can’t forgive him.

“I will win! I shall win right here, and take all of your powers!” Gaokerena roared as he desperately pulled on the rope once more.

Your face! It’s terrifying! What’s wrong with your face?!

“Whoa! Seems like the old man’s regained some of his vigor,” Datil said.

“Eep! He surprised me!”

*You guys are a bit **too** relaxed, I think. You could stand to be a little more shocked here.*

“Excellent! This is my victory! Hah!” Gaokerena’s eyes were bloodshot as he pulled on the rope with all his might.

“You can’t win,” Grida muttered quietly, and her voice echoed throughout the room. In an instant, the path creaked to a halt before slowly starting to move toward me.

“Gah! Wh-Why?! How can a stray like you—not even connected to the main body—wield this much power?!”

Grida took on a harsher tone as she glared at him. “You’re wrong. I can tell that this isn’t just me. This is all of our power combined! Me, Furutsu, Fresasan, and Datil-san!”

Really?! Now that you mention it, every time you touched the path, my body felt a little lighter. Gaokerena tried to fight back with all his might, but he was slowly getting dragged toward our side.

“Ugh, no! Anything but this! Stop, I beg you! Forgive me!” he said, his confident air crumbling. However, Grida didn’t stop pulling.

“No! You pretended you were a god and ate a lot of people, didn’t you?”

That’s right. He called himself a god and just went around eating all the people who worshiped him.

“Wh-What?! Pretending to be a god, you say?! I am no mere god—I am above that! All I did was eat humans! Why must I be in this situation from consuming a few animals?! Stop! Stop!” The white line steadily approached his feet.

“Pathetic. Didn’t you challenge us? You’re a sore loser, old man,” Datil said.

He’s right. If I was in your position and had bet my own life on all this, I sure wouldn’t be this pathetic about it.

“Aw, what happened to that dandy face of yours?” Fresa said. “Oh well, not like buff men are my type anyway.”

Yeah, you said that already.

“Please! Stop! Stoop! I beg of you! S-Save me!” Gaokerena cried, his hair disheveled as he shook his head vigorously once again. The white line was finally right in front of his feet.

Grida laughed. “Goodbye, old man,” she said with a smile.

Gaokerena yelled through his tears. “Nooooo!”

Chapter 5: The Apple's Village

Everything around me went dark. *Wow, again? Hey, Grida, Fresa, Datil! H-Huh?! I can't talk anymore!*

"Furutsu?"

Hey, Grida! You okay?

"Yup! Are you?"

Yeah. Can you see anything? It's so dark, but I'm sure you can see something. Right?

"Nope, nothing. Fresa-san and Datil-san are gone too."

I see. Then where are we? What happened to us?

Bing Bing Bing Ding! "Currently under deliberation. Please wait a few moments."

Huh? What was that?

"Deliberation?"

Oh, did you hear that too? Deliberating what? This isn't the usual announcement from the Cards of Fate either.

Bing Bing Bing Ding! "Currently under deliberation. Please wait a few moments."

It's just repeating itself. Given my total lack of understanding of the situation, I decided to just sit still and wait. Oh, by the way, Grida—what do I look like right now?

"Like an apple."

Rats. I thought so. Your voice is echoing from within me again.

Bing Bing Bing Ding! "Currently under deliberation. Please."

Please?

"Thank you very much for your patience. I am a unit that manages the Theatrum," a voice said.

Whoa, that surprised me! That sounded way more natural all of a sudden!

“The following ruling has already been decided, and the results cannot be changed. You may not ask any questions. Thank you for your understanding.”

Okay, so this voice is coming from a unit that controls this place then? It sounds polite, but the actual content is a bit much. I guess they want me to just shut up and listen.

“After deliberation, regarding the match between [Gaokerena-sama] and [Furutsu-sama], the victor is [Furutsu-sama].”

Two spotlights suddenly shone on me and a small pot a short distance away.

“Huh?! I never saw that here!” Grida said.

So you couldn't see it either? I guess we're not surrounded by darkness, but by something else. I still have so many questions, including about the Theatrum we were just in.

“This is absurd! This match is invalid! Invalid!” Inside the pot was a small tree, shaking its branches as it talked.

Wait, this voice sounds familiar. Oh, are you Gaokerena?!

“This thing is a descendant from the banished Tree of Knowledge, is it not?! It is not a ruler, so it should not have been able to fight in the Theatrum! This ungrateful apple makes a mockery of our ways!”

*What?! What are you on about?! **You're** the one that challenged **me**!*

Bing Ding! “Confirmed the key terms [banished] and [Tree of Knowledge]. I will now report the results of the deliberation. Our management system has taken into account that [Furutsu-sama] is outside of the ranks. As such it has been decided that [Furutsu-sama] will receive the rank of Quasi-quasi Markt, or Light-Black Tree rank. This has already been reported and accepted by the axis power Ain Soph Owl.”

Nope! Didn't get a word of that! I'm just gonna ignore it!

“Wh-What?! How can that be possible?!” The tree in the pot trembled.

You'd be a lot cuter if you didn't sound like an old man.

“Now, based on the results and details of the battle, the post-battle arrangements will begin,” the managing unit said in a monotonic voice, completely ignoring Gaokerena’s cries. The small tree drooped down as though he had accepted his fate.

I take that back. Keep talking, actually. Now I just feel bad.

Ding! “Confirmed the soul links of [Furutsu-sama].”

Glowing letters appeared near my feet on the dark ground.

{Grida} (Currently present)

{Fresa}

{Datil}

“As the matters about to be discussed may affect your fates, the above members will be forcibly shifted.” A thudding noise echoed throughout the room, and two additional spotlights illuminated Fresa and Datil.

Ding! “Adjusting language barriers. Starting Spirit Communication.”

“Ow... Hey there, Apple-san! Where are we?!” Datil asked.

“Phew, I’m glad you’re okay! We suddenly returned to the village, and all the villagers were on the ground, and you were gone! I was sooo worried!” Fresa said.

I’m glad you guys are okay. I have no idea what’s going on here either, but...I doubt you could hear me anyway.

“Whoa, you can talk now?!”

“Wow! That’s totally amazing! I’m happy for you!”

Wait, you can hear me? Why?!

“Really? Can they hear my voice too?” Grida asked.

I doubt it.

“Oh, that voice sounds familiar! I’m glad you’re safe too!”

“Grida-chan! You really *are* inside of Apple-san, aren’t you?”

You can hear her too?! Seems like you can talk with them more, Grida.

“Your conversations are being translated in real time and will be delivered directly to your souls. Please note that this is simply a temporary measure,” the managing unit said.

Oh, so I guess we can’t talk to each other forever.

“That’s a shame,” Fresa said.

“Hey, what’s with that potted tree over there?” Datil asked, pointing.

Oh, that’s just Gaokerena.

“Seriously?! He’s so small now!”

“He looks like he’s wilting. Is it because he lost?” Fresa said.

Well, I mean, he did end up like that because of us, yeah.

“Sniff... If it weren’t for you lot, I’d...I’d...” he mumbled, briefly glancing at us before turning away. His branches drooped even lower. Of course, Gaokerena didn’t have any eyes, but I somehow felt his gaze.

“Anyway, what’s gonna happen now?” Datil asked me.

You see, I don’t know. The thing said something about a “battle” and “post-battle arrangements.”

“Thank you for your patience. The post-battle arrangements will now commence,” the unit said. A different set of glowing letters appeared by my feet.

{Nursery}

{Throne of Souls}

“The above will now be under possession of [Furutsu-sama]. Firstly, the Nursery that [Gaokerena-sama] had possessed will be handed over in its entirety to [Furutsu-sama], including the organisms that live within.”

Wait, wait? No way!

Fresa looked puzzled. “Apple-san, by ‘Nursery,’ does it—?”

“Let’s talk later. There’s still more explanations to come, Fresa-san,” Datil said, cutting her off.

“Secondly, [Gaokerena-sama]’s Tree Spirit will be eliminated, and the Throne of Souls, now a blank slate, will be transferred to [Furutsu-sama]. You may use it how you wish.”

I have no idea what that means. Hey, could I ask a question? What’s a Throne of Souls—?

“Ahhhhh! It hurts! I can’t take it!” A piercing cry suddenly rang through the room.

Huh, what’s going on?

“Nooo! Stop! It hurts! I do not want to disappear! I want to stay!” Gaokerena shrieked as he was wrapped in a white-blue flame. He shook his branches, writhing in pain. “Agh! Ow! P-Please! Don’t kill me! It hurts!” Gaokerena continued to cry out.

Ding! “Currently eliminating [Gaokerena-sama]’s Tree Spirit. Please wait.”

Hold on! You don’t have to go that far...

“I feel so sorry for him, Apple-san!”

“Yeah, this is a bit much...”

Fresa and Datil were grimacing as they stared at the small tree.

Hey, this wasn’t the tone you took with the villagers, was it? Ah! You’re not being fooled by appearances, are you? There’s a super buff guy behind that tree, you know.

“Nooooo! H-H-Help meee!” Gaokerena continued to scream.

Ding! “Currently eliminating [Gaokerena-sama]’s Tree Spirit. Please wait.”

Hey, stop that already! Cut it out!

“Auuugh! Stop! Please! Stop!”

Ding! “Currently eliminating [Gaokerena-sama]’s Tree Spirit. Please wait.”

Damn it! If it’s not gonna stop, I have to force it to! I’m not sure where to aim,

*but I just need to attack that big thing, right? Strength at one hundred percent!
Remove the shackles of fire, traveler!*

Ding! “Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at one hundred percent.”

A huge fireball erupted before disappearing high into the sky.

Ding. “Detected a magic attack. Elimination of Tree Spirit has been suspended. Eliminated 18.3% of the spirit.”

“Ugh... Huff... Y-You saved me,” Gaokerena said, tottering as he faced toward me.

Oooh! Is he gonna say the line?!

“Why? Why did you save me?”

He said it! I mean, why, you ask? I couldn't bear to watch. Now, run while you can.

Gaokerena laughed.

Why're you laughing?! Hurry up and get outta here!

“I cannot. I cannot leave this place. That is the way of things. The management unit is simply suspending my elimination because you, the victor, intervened.”

Got it. So, I just gotta redirect my request, right? Hey! Management unit! Is there a way to save Gaokerena?

“What are you doing?! I am your enemy!”

That doesn't matter! From my point of view, you're just a potted tree that moves funny, okay? A moving tree sounds kinda fun, so I'll just cultivate you forever or something!

“Your selfish request will never be fulfilled. The management unit of this Theatrum is just a system that mechanically carries out its protocols until the end of time.”

Selfish? You're one to talk. In any case, I don't need this Nursery or that Throne of Souls! I'll just throw them all away the moment I get them! Is that all right with you, management unit?

“What?! You cannot be serious. This is the ruler’s Throne of Souls!”

Again—I don’t know what any of this means, and therefore I don’t care. Don’t need it!

Bing Ding! “Confirmed the key terms [Throne of Souls] and [don’t need]. [Furutsu-sama], here is an alternative suggestion for you.” Another spotlight illuminated a new area, a short distance away from Gaokerena. In that spotlight was...

“Datil, look!” Fresa cried.

“Is that Gruszka?!” Datil said.

“Organism name [Gruszka] is expected to die in [982] seconds. As an exception, should this organism be combined with [Gaokerena-sama]’s Tree Spirit, and should [Furutsu-sama] connect a path with this organism, the post-battle arrangements can be completed.”

*“Expected” to die?! Gruszka was still **alive**?!*

“That man is still breathing after being struck by my magic?!” Gaokerena said.
Seriously. I can’t believe he’s still fine after those massive flames.

“Apple-san, no! He’s not fine! If you don’t hurry, he’ll die!” Datil said.

Whoops, right. I have less than one thousand seconds left.

“Well, I can’t really sympathize with an evil man,” Fresa said.

Come on, don’t say that. He’s evil, but he protected the children from Gaokerena’s fire. Now then, what should I do here?

Grida giggled. “You say that, but you’ve already decided, haven’t you?”

I’m no match for you. I guess I’ll ask that guy for confirmation though.
Gaokerena, what do you wanna do?

He thought for a moment. “Of course, there is no reason to decline if you are willing to spare my life, but you should make the final judgment. You can do whatever you wish with me.”

Great, then I guess we’ve made our choice! Hey, management unit! Could you combine Gaokerena and Gruszka?

“Certainly. Thank you for accepting this suggestion. Please wait while I report this to Ain Soph Owl... Report completed. A set of conditions has been presented by Ain Soph Owl.”

Conditions?

“Before combining the two, [Gaokerena-sama]’s memories regarding confidential ruler information shall be erased. Will you accept this condition?”

Excuse me? That’s a bit too much!

“Hm. Confidential information...” Gaokerena said, shaking its branches.

No way that’s okay! Gimme a sec. Hey! I’d like to have a word with your manage—

“Fine. You may erase my memories. Make haste.”

“Acceptance confirmed. [Gaokerena-sama]’s memory disposal...”

Whoa! No! Wait! Wait!

“...has been suspended.”

Whew! That was close. Hey, Gaokerena! What’s your deal? Even if only a portion of your memory gets erased, that’s still pretty bad! Are you sure you’re okay with that?

“It cannot be helped. Information regarding the rulers cannot be leaked. I doubt they can conveniently erase just a portion—I would imagine that almost my entire memory will be wiped.”

Seriously?! That kinda sucks!

Gaokerena laughed. “Hah, you truly are an odd one. My Tree Spirit will not be eliminated; I cannot ask for anything more. You should worry about that human’s life more than mine.” He pointed his branches toward Gruszka.

Ugh, we’re out of time!

“Now then... Erase my memories. You may combine me immediately after that.”

“Acceptance confirmed. [Gaokerena-sama], all memories regarding confidential information will now be erased.”

Gaokerena!

“You are truly mysterious, Fruit of Knowledge. Perhaps it would be interesting to see where your journey ends.” The area was enveloped in light, as Gruszka’s and Gaokerena’s shadows floated in the air. The two silhouettes slowly started to overlap in the sky.

“Gah! So bright!” Datil said, squinting up at the sky.

“Amazing! Is this how combining works?!” Fresa said, narrowing her eyes as well.

As the two silhouettes turned into one, the bright light grew smaller and the ball of light slowly fell to the ground. One man emerged.

“This feels weird,” Gruszka said, staring at his hands.

“Gruszka!” Datil said.

“Are you okay?” Fresa called.

Gruszka looked up. “Yes. As you can see, I feel good as new! Look!” He raised his right hand, then his left, and smiled. “It seems like I’m both Gruszka and Gaokerena. Yet this somehow feels right, mysteriously enough. What an odd sensation... Ah, please do call me Gruszka, as you did before.” He closed his eyes and bowed slightly.

“I mean, you certainly do look like Gruszka,” Datil said.

“Yeah, the only thing that changed might be the color of your hair,” Fresa observed. Gruszka’s hair was now brown with green highlights, but there didn’t seem to be any other notable differences.

How about memories? I’m especially curious about what happened to Gaokerena’s.

“Most of my memories are Gruszka’s,” he said.

Looks like Gaokerena was right. Most of his memories seem to be gone.

“But the Tree Spirit is most definitely within me. Both Gaokerena and I are grateful to you,” he continued, bowing deeply.

I feel like he’s gotten more calm and polite since they combined...

Clink! Something fell from Gruszka's head onto the floor.

What was that? This place is too dark.

"You dropped something. Uh...here it is! Found it!" Datil said, picking up a hair decoration that was burnt completely black. "Huh, isn't this...?"

"Hey! That's mine!" Fresa yelled. Fresa's hair decoration from the Hoard Lottery—the Fire Dragon's Hair Decoration, to be specific—had fallen from Gruszka's head.

That accessory gave slight fire resistance, right? Ah, that's why you were still alive after getting hit by that fire magic!

"Huh? Why was that on my head?" Gruszka said, feigning innocence.

Oh boy, that amnesia thing's coming in real handy right now, isn't it? Nice try, you already said that you kept Gruszka's memories.

"Gruszka! You stole this from me, didn't you?!" Fresa accused.

He laughed. "I'm so terribly sorry. Please forgive what the bandit did."

You kinda sounded like Gaokerena there, but you seem a bit too high and mighty considering you're still the one who stole it.

"Ughhh! I don't know if I can trust you in the future!"

"Don't worry. My path is currently connected with Furutsu-sama's, so I can't do anything nefarious toward you. You're above me."

This I kinda get. The path I connected with Gruszka is a bit different from the ones I connected with Fresa and Datil. Our paths are upper-class, while Gruszka's is lower-class.

"Furutsu, your string goes through Gruszka-san and is connected to the other villagers," Grida said.

Really? I still can't see anything myself, but that's pretty interesting. Oh, also, I'm sorry, Fresa and Datil! It seems like I absorbed dayquril—some sort of life force energy—from you guys.

"Really?" Fresa said.

"Are you serious?" Datil said.

That makes me no different from Gaokerena, huh?

The two looked at each other and laughed.

“Ha ha ha, don’t worry about it too much!”

“He’s right, you know? Absorb as much as you like!”

What?! You guys can’t be serious! I don’t know what this does to you! I might even be shortening your life span!

“Apple-san, I’m alive here today because you saved me,” Fresa said.

“Same goes for me. If I can give anything to you, I’d do it, even if it meant my life.”

You guys... Thank you so much. I might be taking some dayquril from you too, Grida.

She giggled. “You haven’t!”

Wait, what?

“Thank you for your patience. Post-battle arrangements shall recommence.”

The word “Nursery” once again popped up on the ground near me. *Right, we’re still in the middle of this.*

“What do they mean by Nursery?” Datil asked.

I’m not too sure, but it seems like Rhuvae Village is also a Nursery.

“Oooh! So does that mean this village is yours now?” Fresa said.

I guess, but the whole “enhanced birth rate” thing creeps me out. Quite honestly, I don’t need it.

“The current Nursery will be dismantled and rebuilt. Please note that all creatures will be safely stocked away,” the unit said.

Dismantled? Stocked?! Just what do you think these villagers are?! Hey, wait!

Ding! “Successfully dismantled.”

Wait, seriously?! Don’t go too far with this, management system-thing!

“Would you like to create a new Nursery here?”

You're not even listening to me! I'm not about to casually look around for the perfect spot while those villagers are "stocked" somewhere! Make one right now!

Ding! "Understood. A Nursery will be created in this area. If you would like to change its type, please select from the following."

You're just listening to me when it suits you! Wait, whoa. Letters are popping up beneath me.

{Prison (current)}

{City}

{Labyrinth}

{Tower (cannot be selected)}

{Island (cannot be selected)}

Okay, so I feel like I understand some stuff here. So these are the kinds of Nurseries I can make? It looks like I can't choose all of them though.

Ding! "The current ground is not stable enough for a tower. An island requires an ocean and cannot be selected without one."

Got it. We're in the middle of a desert, after all.

Datil muttered to himself with a puzzled expression as he stared at the words on the ground. "Is Rhuvae Village a prison? Looking from the inside, doesn't it feel more like a city?"

"Hmmm, maybe it means that the villagers can't, like, go outside or something?" Fresa said.

Huh. Fresa's probably right. If I choose "city" here, then people might be able to go in and out freely. "Labyrinth" also piqued my interest, but no, probably not a great option. Hey, management system! I want to change the type to "city"!

Ding! "The Nursery type has been changed to 'city.' Please select from the options below. You may select more than one."

{Automatic adjustment of soil}

{Automatic adjustment of water}

{Increase reproduction: Water (cannot be selected)}

{Increase reproduction: Produce (cannot be selected)}

{Thought manipulation: Worship}

{Thought manipulation: Idleness}

{Thought manipulation: Labor}

{Thought manipulation: Belligerence}

{Automatic healing}

{Physical enhancement}

Ding! “To select ‘increase reproduction,’ the Nursery type must be a closed environment.”

It’s gotta be this!

“Apple-san, this ‘increase reproduction’ must be...” Datil started.

You get it, right? Yeah, Gaokerena most likely increased their birth rates with this.

“Yes, I still have those memories,” Gruszka said. “I can’t quite understand what Gaokerena was thinking back then, but I now think that I’ve done something awful to those humans. I’m very sorry.”

As long as you understand. From a different viewpoint, it’s probably difficult to ask a human who cuts down trees and eats vegetables to feel guilty about their actions.

“Thank you for your kind words. Rhuvae Village was set with both ‘increase reproduction’ options, {Thought manipulation: Worship}, and {Thought manipulation: Labor}. Those with connected paths will have their thoughts manipulated while they’re inside the Nursery.”

I see. So that’s why you were seen as a god.

“According to my memories, increasing reproduction will decrease their life spans, but thought manipulation doesn’t seem to have any adverse effects on

the human body.”

“Really? So then should we give them, like, labor or something?” Fresa said.

Wait, I don't want to force them to work. I think a humanlike city has both people who work diligently and people who slack off.

“Wow, you're amazing, Apple-san. I think a king would choose worship and labor!”

A king?! No thanks, no interest in ruling at all.

“Hm, as usual, you're not very greedy, are you? Since they're offering, might as well take this place,” Datil said.

I'm not fit to be a king, you know. Besides, the villagers were in a prison. I want them to live freely in a normal city from now on.

“You're so kind!” Grida giggled.

Yep, I'm the kindest apple in the world toward humans. Gruszka, do you know if automatic healing and physical enhancements negatively affect the human body?

“As far as I know, the moment you activate those options, their life spans would decrease,” he replied.

Oh. Then I guess we shouldn't choose these. A strong body's great, but wouldn't be worth much if everyone dies quickly.

“However, these effects will only activate under extreme conditions.”

Oh? Could you elaborate?

“Automatic healing only triggers when a human receives a fatal injury, ingests a lethal poison, or is afflicted with a serious illness. Physical enhancements will only activate if they're in a life-threatening situation. Anyone with their path connected in the Nursery will be protected.”

I see. So they might get protected from an instant death situation in exchange for some of their life span!

“Correct. In addition, the decreased life span from automatic healing and physical enhancements can be restored with sleep.”

Wait, so everything resets if you sleep?! That's so good!

“However, the period of sleep is proportional to the amount of life span that has been decreased. In addition, they will not receive the effects from automatic healing or increased life span while asleep. They sleep much more deeply than an ordinary human, and if shocked awake, the life span they've lost won't return.”

I see. So once these effects activate, they need to sleep well in a safe place. But this isn't a bad idea.

“Right. The people that were trapped here their entire lives will be thrown into the outside world. It'll definitely be dangerous!” Fresa said.

Exactly. There are way too many beasts and monsters that attack humans in this world. To release these villagers without any sort of plan would be like throwing cicadas into a carp-infested lake—they'd be easy prey!

“Furutsu?” Grida said.

Listen, I've never done it before. In fact, I tried to stop them. But everyone else in my class, even the girls, just couldn't stop. They kept catching cicadas and throwing them into the lake for those fish. The cicadas didn't do anything wrong! They were just living their lives! One by one, they got devoured... No! No, stop! Don't do it! You guys are horrible! Nooo!

“Furutsu?! What's wrong?! Calm down!”

Huh?! Huff... S-Sorry about that. I'm fine now.

“Datil, what do you think just happened to him?”

“I'm not sure, but it sounds like he's had a very traumatic past.”

Yeah, it was hellish. Anyway, let's select from these options. I'm worried about them while they're, uh, “stocked.” Management system, I choose {Automatic adjustment of soil}, {Automatic adjustment of water}, {Automatic healing}, and {Physical enhancement}.

Ding! “{Automatic adjustment of soil}, {Automatic adjustment of water}, {Automatic healing}, and {Physical enhancement} have been selected. Please select the Nursery's surrounding environments from the following. You may

select more than one.”

{Palace (current)}

{Ramparts}

{Sea of Trees}

{Moats (caution)}

{Thick fog (cannot be selected)}

{Poisonous swamp (cannot be selected)}



Ding! “To maintain a moat, a water source is necessary. ‘Thick fog’ and ‘poisonous swamp’ cannot be selected as the current area is dry.”

Got it. Makes sense.

“You may also make more detailed requests for your environment. For example, if you were to choose a ‘palace,’ you can adjust the internal structure, place gatekeepers, and set traps,” Gruszka said.

To create an open and free city, it’s probably best to not set anything, but monsters are everywhere in this world. Some defenses are required. I’ll choose the ramparts and moats.

Ding! “{Ramparts} and {Moats} have been selected for your surrounding environments. Please set a design for your ramparts.”

The map of the city and its surroundings was displayed on the ground. A red line was drawn, indicating where the rampart would be built. *Wait, this would make the city too small. I’d like to make it wider... Oh! The line moves according to my thoughts! Convenient! Okay, let’s do this...*

All right, done! This village should now be super convenient and nice to live in. Probably.

“They really were picky about the details, weren’t they?” Datil said.

“It was kinda fun though!” Fresa added.

It sounds like you guys enjoyed it, but I didn’t really understand all of the options and kinda just added some random stuff too. Will this be okay?

“I’m terribly sorry. I never selected most of these settings either,” Gruszka apologized.

Nah, not your fault. For stuff like this, you just need to roll with it.

“You haven’t changed, Furutsu!” Grida said, giggling happily.

Don’t worry. At the very least, it’s an improvement from before. All we have to do is explain this to the villagers and...

Ding! “Congratulations. The stocked organisms have now been placed inside

the Nursery.”

Huuuh?! Hello? Wait! Hey, management system, you idiot! Why don't you show yourself so that you can get a stern talking to, huh?! They're gonna be completely flabbergasted if you just release them there out of nowhere!

“With this, the post-battle arrangements have been completed. Thank you for your patronage, and I hope to see you again.” As the announcement ended, the lights all went out.

Ignored again, eh? Man, the villagers must be surprised.

“I know it's a bit too late to be saying this, but do you think we went too far, Apple-san?” Datil asked.

“Woow! I can't believe this!” Fresa gasped.

The village previously enjoyed its environment of green nature and mountains. Now, the new and improved Rhuvae Village was surrounded by large ramparts, and stone houses were lined up in an orderly fashion. The roads were paved with stone as well, and it felt a lot more modern.

Gruszka looked around with awe. “Wonderful. It looks completely different!”

The Nursery ran on a point-based system. Points were required for renovations, and could be obtained every month based on the number of citizens associated with the place. To start, I received 20,000 points—which I used to create rivers, wells, fruit trees, livestock, and roads. I used what was left to add buildings.

“Man, isn't this more like a town than a village now?” Datil said.

“But it's not like the number of people changed, riiight?” Fresa said.

I figured that houses were a necessity, and made more than required just in case. As a result the place started looking more like a city, but a lot of those houses were empty. *Back in Japan, I think your population needed to hit a certain number before a place technically became a town or city. You also had to have certain public institutions, and some other stuff too, I'm pretty sure. How can a village become a town in this world?*

“Apple-san, you look like you want to know the difference between a town and a village,” Fresa said.

What kind of look is that?! Tell me! I don't have a face!

“If I recall, you need at least two hundred houses with people constantly living in them and approval from the king to become a town,” Gruszka explained.

“Towns get a street connected to the royal capital free of charge, and an adventurers' guild and barracks are built as well.”

Judging from what you've said, it sounds like only good things can occur from becoming a town, but doesn't that just mean that you'd be under the surveillance of the kingdom? If that's the case, we can remain a village.

“And now you look like you're thinking, ‘That sounds like a pain, so let's leave it as a village.’ Right?” Fresa said.

Again: no face! I'm begging you, please stop with the perfect readings of my nonexistent facial features.

“Jeez, Fresa-san. Apple-san's thinking that it's even more of a pain now,” Datil said.

And you're getting better at reading my thoughts too, Datil. Anyway, past this residential area is the heart of the village.

“Furutsu, these houses look wonderful! Oh? Are there big and small ones?” Grida asked.

Ah, very observant. There's over fifty building types with different designs. Based on the materials needed, each house ranges from 10 to 5,000 points. With 5,000 points, you can create a palace.

“A palace?! That's amazing! I want to live in one of those!”

So you wanna be a princess? Then when we've got enough points, let's make a palace for ourselves!

Grida gasped. “A-Are you p-p-propos—? Waaah!” I heard a fizzling sound.

H-Hey, are you okay, Grida?

“Mmmmm, I-I'm okay... Oooh...”

You sure? All right then. A lavish place wasn't necessary this time around, so I made fifty houses that were each around 20 points, and fifty 30-point houses. One hundred in total there. Half of them are for smaller families of around four, and the other half can house up to ten. If anyone has more than ten family members, it might be inconvenient, but they'd need to use two houses. I also made a large building over there. I thought it'd be good for meeting places and stuff! 200 points for that one.

"Wooow, I like your style, Apple-san!" Fresa said.

"I guess good-looking guys can only do cool things," Datil said.



Aw shucks. I put a fountain in the center of the town square too. 5 points. As a bonus, the water gushing out doesn't give off those creepy vibes anymore.

"Welcome back, everyone!" a voice called. Many villagers were standing in front of the fountain. It seemed like the village leader, Okhar, had gathered everyone.

"Datil, we should apologize in Apple-san's stead..."

"Right, he seemed really bothered by it."

Thanks, guys. I'm glad you understand me. I'd like to apologize first. I made this to save them, but anyone would get angry if their hometown was completely torn apart and rebuilt into something new.

"Datil-san, Fresa-san, could you leave this to me?" Gruszka said with a serious expression. I was sure he had stuff to say as Gaokerena. I rolled around him.

"Well, if you're okay with that..."

"Gruszka, we're leaving this to you, okaaay?"

He silently nodded and faced the villagers. "Everyone! I'm sure you're all surprised by the recent course of events. I can start by explaining why this happened—"

"Gruszka-sama, we've all retained our memories," Okhar suddenly called out, cutting him off. At once, the villagers started kneeling and bowing their heads toward Gruszka. "We have a request! Would you please be the leader of our village?"

Huh?

"Wh-What are you all doing? What's going on?" Gruszka said, wide-eyed. He seemed at a loss for words.

A couple stepped forward. "Gruszka-sama, you sacrificed your body to save my family—my children." Eight kids lined up in front and bowed their heads.

"Thank you, Gruszka-sama!"

"I was so scared!"

"You were so cool!"

“Thank you very much.”

“Hey, stay with us in this village!”

The kids started to surround Gruszka and tugged on his arms and sleeves as they expressed their gratitude. He didn’t know how to react.

“We were out of our minds. I can’t believe we’ve been sacrificing our own children.”

“There was always this sort of fog in my head, and I was genuinely wishing that my family and I would get sacrificed. Just thinking about that fireball almost burning my kids terrifies me.”

The young couple, tears rolling down their faces, bowed their heads as well. “Thank you. Truly, thank you so much. Please continue to lead us!”

Gruszka stared at the ground. “I don’t deserve to lead you all.” With a determined look on his face, he lifted his head back up toward the villagers. “Inside me is Gaokerena, who trapped and ate so many of you. I am half him.”

The villagers started whispering to each other, but Okhar immediately spoke. “We know.”

Huh?! How?!

“What?!” Gruszka exclaimed.

Okhar smiled. “We’ve been worshiping the Great Gaokerena since we were born, living by his side. There isn’t a person in this village who hasn’t noticed the Great Gaokerena’s presence inside of you.”

Seriously?! I can’t tell at all...

“But, I—Gaokerena has been fooling you this entire time!”

The villagers looked at each other and smiled. “Gruszka-sama, the fact that you told us this honestly is all we need to know. I’m sure you’ll treasure us. Besides,” Okhar said, pointing to his head, “you’re the one giving us a lot of power from this, aren’t you?”

Giving power from the path? Gruszka—I mean, Gaokerena’s been doing that?!

“You...you can tell?!”

Speaking of, the villagers were all getting their dayquril absorbed. They looked all wrinkly and frail, like when someone gets their life force drained in a manga or something...

“Yes. I can’t say it with absolute certainty, but I can feel a warm and kind power flowing into all of us.”

But Gaokerena used all of that, didn’t he? Isn’t it taking a toll on him if he’s giving his power to, like, one hundred villagers?

“Your dayquril was about to be completely drained. If no one’s there to refill that, you’ll die. This is what I—I mean, Gaokerena must atone for.”

Okhar and Noix took Gruszka’s hands. “The past is the past. You’re our savior.”

In addition to the eight kids already there, Okhar’s four children also started tugging on Gruszka’s sleeves. *Jeez, that’s adorable!*

“Please, lead this renewed Rhuvae Village. Please lead us!” Okhar said.

“Gruszka-sama! Please stay here forever!”

“Pretty please!”

“Please! I beg you, stay with us!”

The other villagers started joining in as well. Gruszka glanced toward us apologetically.

Datil laughed. “It’s up to you. Isn’t this nice?”

“I’m happy for you! But if you aren’t a good leader, I’ll get mad, okay?” Fresa said.

Seems like they’re both fine with this situation. Guess I’ll signal it too. As I rolled around him, Gruszka’s shoulders trembled and he stared at the ground.

After a while, he looked up and smiled. “Thank you so much, everyone. Thank you for forgiving a man like me. Let’s work hard together from now on. We’ll make this the best village ever!”

The villagers cheered and clapped.

“Let’s do this, Gruszka-sama!”

“Yes, of course!” he replied. Though Gruszka and the villagers all looked shaky on their feet from the day’s events, he and Okhar exchanged a handshake with smiles on their faces.

Well, I didn’t expect this guy to end up the leader of a village...

“I have a request!” Gruszka suddenly said, bowing deeply with an apologetic look. “Um... I know this is rather impertinent of me to ask, but my—”

“Yep, we knooow! Your subordinates, right?” Fresa said, cutting him off as though she was waiting for him to ask.

“If we don’t hurry, things might get a little complicated, Fresa-san,” Datil said.

I guess you guys saw through him.

Gruszka looked shocked, and took a deep breath to steady himself before continuing. “Thank you for your kind words. My subordinates have indeed committed evil acts, but they’re like family to me. Please, allow me to relocate them to this village.”

The members of the Gruszka Group had all been captured, placed in a carriage, and sent off with the two Rank C adventurers. *By now, they **should** be at a campsite and turned over to the authorities...*

“They’re very loyal toward me. I’ll see to it that they never cause trouble to other people ever again. Please let them stay here,” Gruszka said, bowing again.

“Apple-san, I’m sure there’s no need for me to ask, but what do you wanna do?” Datil said.

Ha ha ha. Right, you don’t need to ask. I heard that all bandits get hanged. If his subordinates promise to never do anything evil again, help these villagers, and start living together, they’d be a great asset to society. I rolled around Datil and Fresa.

“I knew it! You’re such a sweet apple!” Fresa said.

*Well, I **am** an apple. You don’t want me to be sour all the time, do you?*

Grida giggled. “Furutsu, you didn’t have to phrase it all uncool like that!”

Heh, pretty clever wordplay on my part there, right?

“Huh? You weren’t sounding uncool on purpose?”

Wait, what? Grida?

“Um! N-Nothing!”

Weird, but okay. Anyway, let’s hurry and go to that thing.

“Oh, we’re going already?”

“Right. That thing will totally come in handy right now!”

*I knew you’d get it. **Roll. Roll. Roll.***

“E-Excuse me, where are you going?” Gruszka said, following us with a puzzled look on his face.

“Apple-san, that’s the flying tree, isn’t it?” Datil asked.

“A wonderful tree indeed!” Fresa said.

In a wide plain were two large trees. *Each of these cost 500 points, you know.*

“What?! Are you sure we can use these for my subordinates?!” Gruszka said.

“What are you on about? Apple-san prepared these specially for them,” Datil replied.

I didn’t think you’d end up a village chief though—I just knew we’d need these to bring your subordinates. I made two of ’em just in case.

“I see. Th-Thank you so much!” Gruszka said, wiping his tears.

*I **should** be using these points for the villagers, but better to save a few lives, right?*

“How does this work again?” Fresa asked.

“Were you not listening, Fresa-san?” Datil said, staring at Fresa with a withering look. He then reached for the tree. “Um, you touch it here...”

Yep, if anyone I have a path connected to touches the trunk...

“Oh! Something fell from the branches! Is this the fruit?” Fresa said.

Yeah! Say hello to a fruit from Tobiume, the flying plum tree.

“If we use this, any person with a path connected to Apple-san can

instantaneously teleport back here,” Datil said.

“Like the legendary teleportation magic!” Fresa said.

Heh, amazing, isn't it? If we use this, we can bring Gruszka's subordinates here in an instant.

“Thank you for using your precious flying tree for my subordinates. Thank you!”

Don't worry about it. These aren't single-use items either. I'll make some more of these so that we can warp to wherever we like!

Grida, if you would, please?

“Okay!”

A bunch of weapons and pieces of armor that we'd taken from the Chasm of Catastrophe suddenly appeared in front of the villagers. Even though this area was surrounded by sturdy walls and moats, if monsters and bandits were to attack, they would need a means to fight back.

“Apple-san, could you also give them a bag of the gold coins from Holmer's hidden safe?” Datil asked.

Generous as always, aren't you? This village has had no contact with the outside world. They would definitely need money... Ah! Crap! I gave some of that money to Júzi! I forgot to tell them!

“Apple-san, what's wrong? You just made an ‘oh crap!’ face,” Datil said.

“He's right. What's going on?” Fresa asked.

H-Hey! Stop! I don't have a face, okay?! There's no expressions to read! Ack, now what...? I can't talk, so I have no way to tell them.

“You made that face when I mentioned the gold coins... Did you use them?!” Datil said, glaring at me sharply.

“Apple-san, how could you?! And to think I trusted you!” Fresa said, teary-eyed.

*W-Wait! Wait! Listen, I didn't **use** it! Besides, how can an apple use that much*

money in the first place?! It was a gift to celebrate Berry getting better, and for the fact that Júzi and Arguta switched jobs!

“Pffft, ha ha! Just kidding!” Datil said with a laugh.

Huh?

“It’s *you* we’re talking about here. You probably gave it to some needy people, didn’t you?” Fresa said.

You guys really are great actors! Please don’t use your talents on me!

“You can use Holmer’s stuff for whatever you like. I guess it’s payment from the time you healed my arm!”

*Sorry, Datil. Then things aren’t fair here. I healed Berry with the same exact ability I used on you, **and** I gave her money.*

“Huh, you seem awfully down today, Apple-san.”

“He sure does. Why don’t we just ask him about it next time?” Fresa said.

Sure, I’ll try to think of a good excuse by then. Anyway, Grida, if you would.

Grida giggled. “Datil-san probably wouldn’t get angry over what you did. Hup!” With a thud, a bag of gold coins appeared in front of Gruszka.

“Ah, thank you so much! We’ll use this money carefully,” he said, opening the bag. He proceeded to explain to the villagers. “This is called ‘money.’ With this, we can purchase food and various goods from other towns and villages.”

Okhar took a gold coin in his hand and looked at it with wonder. “Huh. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

The kids peered into the bag, full of curiosity.

“Gruszka-sama! What does the word ‘purchase’ mean?”

“It’s so glittery and beautiful!”

Oh, we gotta start from there? We’ve got a long way to go.

Epilogue

Now then, Fre-san and Dati-san. Shall we go?

“Furutsu?” Grida asked.

Ah, a long time ago, there was this old man wearing a yellow headkerchief that would call out to his two companions. He would travel around the country, defeating corrupt and evil officials.

“Wow! He’s so strong even though he’s old!”

Nah, his companions are the strong ones... No, wait, I think he occasionally fought with his staff.

“A staff? So he’s like you!”

Right, I guess you are a staff. I forget about that sometimes. Grida, I’ve said this a bunch, but I don’t think of you as an item. And I’ll definitely get you out of there and restore you to your original form. I promise.

“Furutsu...thank you.”

Datil whistled. “You guys sure are passionate, huh?”

“Heeey! Stop flirting, and let’s get a move on!”

Speak for yourself! You guys are always kinda flirting, aren’t you? Besides, how can you even tell that I’m talking with Grida right now?!

“Everyone, I’ll open the gates, okay?” Gruszka said, smiling at us.

Whoops, sorry. Go ahead. We were currently at the northern gates, one of the entrances to the village.

“They’re huge! One or two hundred of you could pass through at once, Apple-san,” Datil said.

Hey, stop that. I don’t like thinking about all those apples at once—that was traumatizing! Just looking at them makes me want to fall to the ground. Beyond the ramparts were deep moats, so I’d had to select drawbridges or transfer

circles as a method to go in and out of the village. *Of course I'd pick the drawbridges. If we're aiming for a more open village, this is the way to go.*

"But if we're going to keep this drawbridge down, we'll need soldiers to always guard the gates," Gruszka said.

Exactly. It's dangerous, so I want you to keep the bridges up for now. I'll scout a strong guard soon.

"Mom! Dad! What's the outside world?" a child asked.

The mother giggled. "I'm not even sure what's out there. I was told that there's a vast realm outside this village."

"I haven't gone outside either. But we can leave freely now," the father replied.

The villagers, all wanting to experience the world outside of their village for the first time, lined up. The ramparts had elevated scaffolds for guards to keep watch, but we didn't need any other watchful eyes this time around.

"If anything comes our way, we'll wipe it out," Datil said.

"It's faster that way!" Fresa added.

Precisely. We're in a rush today, and we don't need some elegant departure. We can just brute force our way forward.

"Okay! Open the gates! Lower the bridge!"

With a clatter, the gates slowly started to open and we heard the villagers cheering and clapping.

"Furutsu, something's approaching," Grida warned.

Well, we're pretty noisy, so I'm not surprised.

The drawbridge started to slowly lower with a creak.

"Datil?"

"Roger that, Fresa-san."

Datil had already unsheathed his sword. *So you guys noticed the presence too? Impressive as always.* The villagers were shrieking as they saw the outside

world for the first time.

“Whoa! A-A monster!”

“What *is* that?! Gross!”

Well, even people used to the outside world are disgusted by that thing.

“What a huge insect! I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“There’s so many of them! No! Th-They’re coming closer!”

As the bridge finished lowering, we found a giant group of insects waiting for us. *They look more like scorpions than insects.*

“Apple-san, those things are called scorpii. One scratch from their tails is lethal, thanks to their venom,” Datil said.

Going by the name and the tails, those are definitely scorpions. Also, just getting hit is lethal? I can’t help but think that this world is way too tough on humans.

“All right then. Datil, are we totally gonna beat them up?”

“Yeah. I’ll wipe them out just like we planned!”

Leaving things to brute force isn’t really a plan.

“Excuse me. Could you please leave this to me?” Gruszka asked, bowing his head.

Uh, I don’t mind, but are you sure? There’s quite a few of them.

“Okay, I’ll leave this in your hands!” Datil said.

“Go get ‘em!” Fresa said.

Wait, really?! Are we sure, you guys?!

Gruszka chuckled. “I’ll be okay.” Instead of grabbing the whip he had around his waist, he put his hands out in front of him and chanted, “Varkha ad Martez.” His hands were enveloped in a red light as he expelled a large flame.

What?! Isn’t that Gaokerena’s magic?!

“Of course I can use his magic. I’m part Gaokerena,” Gruszka said, smiling at me as though he heard my voice. As he cast more flames, the scorpii started to

burn up.

“Gruszka-sama, you’re amazing!”

“Such fantastic power!”

The villagers couldn’t tear their eyes away from the awesome sight of Gruszka. The scorpia horde started to shrink smaller and smaller.

“Thank you for your patience. We should be safe now,” he said, bowing once more.

You’re done already?! We didn’t even wait that long! In the distance, I saw the monsters surrounded by roaring flames. You’re amazing, Gruszka. Looks like we don’t have to frantically search for a guard for now.

“Gruszka-sama! Hey, please let me through!” A villager with a horse pushed through the murmuring crowd.

“I’m glad we got this horse,” Gruszka said as he grabbed its reins and brought it closer to Fresa. “Here you go.”

Uh, what? Why’re you giving a horse to Fresa?

“I’m glad you understand, Gruszka. Activate King of Apples!”

Ding! “King of Apples has been activated. Please ensure that others are a safe distance away. Activating in: 10...9... You will feel a strong shock wave, please stand back. 3...2...1...”

Wait, what? But the monsters are already dead.

“Nourishing tonic. Enhance physical capabilities.”

Ding! “All apples will have nourishing effects and enhance physical capabilities. 3...2...1... Upgrade complete.”

Ah, I see! The doping apples! Datil took one from Fresa and fed it to the horse.

“If we don’t hurry, Gruszka’s subordinates may be executed,” he said.

After the horse ate the apple, its muscles started to grow with a bubbling sound.

“I’m really sorry for forcing you to push yourself,” Fresa mumbled

apologetically as she stroked the animal's mane.

Right, once it eats this apple, it'll tire itself out from overexertion and not be able to move for a few days.

"I do feel sorry about it, but we need this horse more than ever right now. It's a bit faster than us, after all," Datil said.

Only a bit faster?! No, you're right. What's more important than speed is conserving our strength. If his men are already under arrest, we probably need some additional physical strength for what's to come—not to mention it'll be pretty illegal. We shouldn't try to run a marathon and just conserve what we can.

"Please, I leave my subordinates' fates in your hands," Gruszka said, quietly bowing. He most likely wanted to come along, but he buried his emotions for the sake of the village.

"Yeah, just sit tight for a bit. We'll save everyone for sure," Datil said with a cheerful grin. He jumped onto the horse. "Let's go, Fresa-san." He pulled Fresa onto the horse as well. Since Grida and I were tagging along, there were technically four people on this horse, but realistically, only two were riding it.

"Farewell. Please stay safe during your trip. I await your swift return," Gruszka said, not budging from his deep bow. Behind him, the villagers were waving at us.

"Good bye! Take care!"

"See you all again!"

It's kinda nice that we have a place we can call home!

"We're off! Grab on tight! Hiyah!" Datil said.

As we left the village behind and they pulled up the drawbridge, the scene quickly shrank to even smaller than a grain of rice before leaving my field of vision entirely.

"Fresa-san, the effects of this apple are amazing," Datil said.

"Riiight?! But we're overexerting the horse a little."

Ahhh! A little?! We're moving so fast! I feel like I'm on a roller coaster!

"The horses and the carriage we left those subordinates with aren't as fast as us, but they're still pretty quick. They might already be at the campsite and handed over to the authorities."

"Yeah... They're probably already being moved over to the next toooown."

Most likely. Gruszka's men should've reached the campsite by sundown yesterday.

"If they're already on their way to the neighboring town, it might be difficult to rescue them. We...should probably hurry, but for whatever reason, I feel weirdly at ease."

"Oh, you too?"

Yeah. It's really strange, but I feel like we'll be fine. To be precise, I have this nagging sensation that the two no-good adventurers did something... Hah! I must be overthinking it! They're really bad at their jobs, but I doubt anything happened! Right? Right?

I've come to realize that the term "impossible" doesn't exist in this world.

"Hey! What's going on? Just what could you have done to screw up this badly?!" Datil said with an exasperated look.

"You guys sure are talented at messing up!" Fresa said happily.

What are you so happy about? Oh, right. Because now we can save Gruszka's subordinates. I guess all's well that ends well.

The two Rank C adventurers were convulsing on the ground, foaming at the mouth. The carriage's harnesses and driver's seat were destroyed, leaving only the luggage space. The passengers were looking at us from the hole in the ripped roof—it seemed like the ones that had taken the horses toward the campsite earlier were with us.

Datil jumped off our horse and counted the passengers.

"One...two...three...phew, you guys are all safe." Everyone from the carriage and Gruszka's men were all safe, but not a single horse was in sight.

“There’s no bodies, so they must’ve run away,” Datil said.

“Yep. I wonder if those two over there are, like, okay?” Fresa asked.

They’re alive, but they really don’t look okay.

After a moment of silence, Datil said, “I can sorta piece together what happened here, but let’s ask, just in case.”

“Ummm, okaaay, so you guys were hounded by a group of monsters...”

“And you fought all night.”

Judging from what the passengers and Gruszka’s subordinates said, it sounded like the Rank C pair did their best.

“Exactly! Those two slashed at the oncoming demons! They beat up the monsters that were coming toward them again and again...” a passenger explained.

I can tell that they really tried their best, but oddly enough, those descriptions just sound comical.

“We were riding on the horses alone, but they ordered us to stay here because it was dangerous. They swore to protect us...”

I think keeping the horseback riders here was a wise decision. It’s too irresponsible to leave them to fend for themselves in the middle of the night without a guard. But, uh, I can actually see the campsite from here.

“They were so close too!” Grida said.

Yeah, around three kilometers or so. I can see the gates and scaffolding very clearly. But no normal human can see that far, much less in the middle of the night.

“How inconvenient...”

*Nah, plants are just **too** convenient.*

“As dawn broke and we thought the monsters had started to leave, those two just fell to the ground as though a puppeteer cut their strings,” the passenger continued. “They lost consciousness then.”

And that's where we came in, I guess. On closer inspection, there's an apple core on the ground. This must be the doping apple that Fresa gave them earlier. The effects were "nourishing tonic" and "enhancing physical capabilities," right?

"So they fought through the night while slowly eating the apple," Datil said. He carried one of them over and set them onto the luggage area of the carriage.

"That's pretty impressive. I'm proud of them," Fresa said, carrying over the other. She proceeded to pull on the reins of the horse that carried us here with one hand, and grabbed the edge of the destroyed driver's seat with the other. "Datil, shall we pull? This horse is pretty tired too."

Pull?

"Absolutely. I could do it myself though."

Yourself?! Wait, are you guys planning to...?

"I bet you could. We're really close," she said, shaking her head with a smile.

"Are you sure? Then let's go." Datil grabbed a bit of wood that was sticking out from the driver's seat, where the harness used to be.

Creak!

The horseless carriage creaked with a low groan before starting to smoothly move. The passengers could only gasp with awe.

"What?!"

"H-Huh?! This can't be real!"

Well, yeah. I'd freak out too. There's over twenty people on this carriage, but Fresa and Datil are pulling it with ease.

"Huh? It's lighter than I thought. Should we speed it up a little?" Datil asked.

"Yeah. I can totally run with this," Fresa said.

Huh?! Did you guys get even stronger?!

Extra: The Forbidden Short Story 2: In the Heavens, the Bewilderment of a Goddess

I heard some mumbling from within the room.

“Oh my, he seems rather angry today. I’m not looking forward to this...” I said.

As you can see, I have once again been called in by the higher-ups. *Well, I did think that this was coming.* I knocked on the door and heard footsteps approaching before it opened.

“I’ve been waiting for you! Come on in!” said the god, who was dressed unnecessarily luxuriously.

He opened the door for me. How scary. The one saving grace is that he’s alone again.

“You know why you’ve been called here, don’t you?” he said.

Of course I do. For now, it seems like I can lie a little, so I’ll play dumb. “I’m not quite sure. Is anything the matter?”

He sighed and silently stared at me as he took out the crystal ball and placed it on his desk. *You’re treating me like a suspect, aren’t you?* As you know, the crystal ball turns red in the presence of a lie. Even little white lies aren’t safe, and it was clear that he was trying to sniff out any falsehoods from the very start.

“It’s about Daisuke Furutsu. I’ll have you tell me everything you know.”

Right. I would’ve never been called here to be interrogated if it wasn’t about him and Grida-chan. I have to be careful—I’m the only one that can protect those two from the gods. My superior, like before, took out three sheets of paper from the mountain of documents. *I feel like that mountain has only gotten bigger since last time. He must really be tired. Thank you for your hard work.*

“I received a few troubling reports about him, you see. You’re periodically

checking up on him, aren't you? Did you notice anything new?"

This is surprising. Even though I can't lie, he's given me a way out. "No, I haven't," I replied. The crystal ball...whew, is still clear. Of course, I haven't noticed anything "new." I knew their secrets from the start, so I'm not lying here.

"Hm?! Is that so...? Hm." He glared at me suspiciously as he looked back and forth between me and the crystal ball.

It sounds like he received some sort of information. Now, who could've done so, and what did they report, I wonder?

He was silent for a moment before continuing. "Take a look. Can you explain this?"

An image appeared on the white wall. I know I've said this before, but the world Furutsu-san is currently in was sealed off by a certain spell. Only still images can be extracted.

"Go ahead. What's this all about?"

The image was of a lone apple in front of the entrance to a large building. This was when Furutsu-san was asked to collect Holmer's belongings. *Why are there always pictures of him that make him look bad? How shall I explain this away?*

"Furutsu-san received the blessing card, so he won't rot or die from malnutrition. As long as he's not destroyed on an atomic level or completely consumed and digested, as you can see, he can remain looking as fresh and juicy as ever..."

"I know that! I'm asking why he's alone in front of a building! I thought he didn't have arms or legs! Did he roll over here on his own?!"

I sighed internally. *Of course I know what you're asking. He really did roll over there on his own, so any reply other than "yes" would make the crystal ball glow red. And it goes without mentioning, but there's no way I can say that. All the other gods would immediately hold a meeting and try to destroy Grida-chan. I have to use my knowledge to my fullest extent.* "It's said to be good luck for an apple to be placed by the entrance, among certain peoples."

This was true. It didn't have to be an apple, just something round and red. Many people actually believed this superstition too.

"Hm, sounds like that's not a lie..." He still had a suspicious look on his face.

*Should the crystal ball glow red, it might be good luck to place **it** in front of the Gates of Heaven—although it'd do us no good now, since the ball remains clear.* I smiled.

"I see. So this is Furutsu being useful as an apple."

"Correct. He's in front of this building because he's an apple." And because he was an apple, he was able to slip past the guard, collect the necessary items, and be useful to Datil-san.

"Hmmm. I see. But the real issue is this image. Take a look."

On the wall was the vast desert, with Furutsu-san trying to enter some ruins. *How odd. I've been checking up on them frequently, but I've never seen this structure before.*

"Do you know what this is? Inside of these ruins is a labyrinth, and to our surprise, within *that* is..." He suddenly went silent and stopped moving. His mouth remained open as though he was trying to speak, but he was completely frozen.

"Is something the matter?" I received no response.

Ding. "Confirmed confidential information. It will be automatically revised."

Huh? Who just said that? What an odd voice. I don't think I've heard it before.

"Hm? Oh? Are you perhaps able to hear me?"

Another voice echoed throughout the room. *I can't see who it is, but it sounds like a man.*

"Oh, right, don't talk. It's better if you don't respond, or they might notice."

Notice? Who will?

"Is it because you've been associating yourself with that soul? Or were you influenced by that branch? Maybe it's a mix of both. Heh, this is pretty convenient then."

Sounds like he's figured something out, but what? I have no idea what he's on about. Um, hello, I shouldn't talk, right?

"Yep, yep. You're a clever one. Listen up, now. I'm sorry, but I can't tell you anything important just yet. If I did, they'd notice us in an instant... Whoa there! Wait! Stop! Don't think! Stop thinking! ...Whew! Yeah, good. There isn't a problem this time around, so we should be fine. I'll try to think of a good way for us to chat when we meet next time. In the meantime, the revision of confidential information will end soon. Listen to me, okay? Don't ever respond to my voice. And don't overthink this stuff. Okay?"

In the next instant, the image of the ruins on the wall disappeared, and my superior was looking at me suspiciously.

"What are you doing? We're done here. Leave."

Whaaat?! What just happened? We were in the middle of talking. "Um, are you sure we're done here? Uh, because... Huh? What were we talking about again?" I stammered.

"Wow, *this* is a surprise. You're not completely revised," the voice said.

I have no idea what you're talking about. What does that mean?

"Uh, let's see. For example, take a look at his desk. How many documents are there?"

Documents? He just pulled out three, so there should be... Huh? Only one sheet of paper was on his desk. *How curious. He definitely took out three.*

"I knew it! Wow. This is starting to get really interesting! Whoops, your supervisor seems to be pretty angry."

Said supervisor glared at me grumpily. "What are you standing around for?! Aren't you busy? I've got so much work to do myself. Get out of here."

Can I really leave? This was very convenient for me, but I couldn't understand what had just happened.

"Yep, that's fine. That's just how gods are. Whoops, can't say much more," the same voice echoed.

It sounds like you have some information that you'd like to tell me.

The voice laughed. “Yeah, I sound really suspicious here, don’t I? But please trust me. I’m on your side—and on the same side as that soul and that branch too. But if I say that, I’m sure Idunn would laugh at me.”

I couldn’t really hear that last bit because you said it so quietly. I’m sorry, I know you’re trying your best, but I’m not quite sure how I’m supposed to be able to trust you.

“Shouldn’t you get out of this room first? You’ll get in trouble again.”

Ah! You’re right! I bowed and left, closing the door behind me. *Phew, seems like I’m safe for now.* I breathed a sigh of relief and glanced at my surroundings.

“Um, is it okay if I talk now?” I said. *No response. How odd.* “Excuse me? Um, mister owner of that mysterious voice?”

Oh no, I can’t hear anything. Was I still not supposed to talk? If so, I’ve just messed everything up. I may have lost my precious ally...though I’m not sure if I could’ve trusted him. Feeling a little down, I opened up the door connected to Furutsu-san’s world.

“Is everyone doing well?” As I went through the door and gazed down at the realm before me, I saw Datil-san and Fresa-san pulling a carriage with a large number of people on board. I did a double take, but they were, in fact, physically pulling the carriage themselves.

“Are they showing off to the gods or something?” I said to myself. *They don’t know about me, or the troubles I just went through. That’s fine by me, though. I just want Furutsu-san and his group to live long and happy lives. I’m the only one who can protect them, so I must work harder.*

“Don’t worry. I’m also here to help. Oh, don’t talk yet!”

As I heard the same voice ringing in my ears again, I breathed another sigh of relief. This voice was indeed mysterious, and I couldn’t tell if he was friend or foe. I wondered if Furutsu-san felt something similar when he first heard Grida-chan’s voice after he had just turned into an apple. I chuckled to myself.

Afterword

Long time no see, or pleased to meet you. I'm Gato. Thank you very much for picking up Volume 2 of *Reincarnated as an Apple*.

I'd like to first apologize that this volume didn't make it in time for the autumn season. I'm currently writing the afterword in October of 2021, in the middle of the night. The temperature has been dropping for the past few days, and we didn't have an autumn at all this year. I'm not lying.

Sorry, I lied.

It's been five months since the release of the first volume. As my first book was being lined up in the bookstores, on this momentous day, I was actually planning on moving.

The most time-consuming part was recycling my plastic bottles. I tore off all the labels, removed the caps, rinsed out the bottles, crushed them to save some space, and threw them out. I was doing this ad nauseam.

I didn't know if I would ever finish and I seemed to be recycling these bottles with no end in sight. I had actually wanted to visit a nearby bookstore or one of the big stores in the neighboring town to check up on my book and internally smile and cheer. "Woohoo! How's my book doing?" I was planning on loitering around bookstores like a creep, so I feel like these bottles saved me from embarrassing myself. Thank you, plastic bottles. We should always remember to recycle them.

In any case, I think it's time I talked about my book. To everyone that picked this up, I believe that many of you have also picked up volume 1. If you haven't, please do so.

To sum it up, there's a lot going on. If I were to use an example, the first volume is basically the first issue, like a magazine published by a certain Japanese company that begins with a "D" and ends in "Agostini."

Y'know, like "Weekly Apple Reincarnation," the first issue is priced differently

at 1320 yen! Kinda sorta like that. But a huge problem came up. It was too big, too thick, too heavy, and too rough for a magazine. I went way overboard. So, taking a few pointers from the first volume, the second volume is a more conveniently slim size. Yet it's still packed with action and information, leaving readers satisfied with their purchase. Or so I'd like to think. So I ask you: How was it? It was okay, wasn't it? Are you angry? Please, no! Don't look at me like that!

Ahem. Anyways, I'm sorry about that. I was told that I had plenty of space to write an afterword this time around, so I thought this was my chance to show everyone my goofy side a bit more. I'm sure a select few of you would be fine if I kept writing like this, but I know the rest of you would think it was a total pain, so I'd like to wrap this up well with a proper afterword.

Because the main character is an apple, *Reincarnated as an Apple* is often thought of as a lighthearted story you'd see in picture books or fairy tales. I don't think this is an incorrect assumption if you just hear about a round, red apple rolling around the world and adventuring. Especially if you look at Itsuki Mito's super cute and wonderful illustrations. All the children will be delighted! Here, eat some of my body! I'm a fruit, after all! I'm sure some people feel like they could safely hand this book to their child as they go about their day doing housework or going to the gym and whatnot.

But no! That's dangerous! Don't do that! That's a trap left by the author! I'm sure you guys are well aware (of course you are), but *Reincarnated as an Apple* is more of a dark fantasy. I've abbreviated this genre to call these books "DARS" (abbreviating way too much). There are grotesque and highly sensitive topics covered, and it would do your child all the harm in the world with no upsides whatsoever (going a bit overboard here).

Wait, what did I want to say again? Oh yes, right, so these DARS—I mean, dark fantasy lovers and brothers that like sake (isn't this from a Kikumasa commercial?)—I mean, people in general, may not realize the existence of *Reincarnated as an Apple*. I'm aware that a certain YouTube channel introduced this book, saying it was mostly comedic, and I agree that there's a lot of snappy, comical dialogue. I'm pretty confident that no reader would finish this and curl up into a gloomy, weeping ball as they wait in solitude for morning to come.

However, I know that this might be selfish of me, but I, Gato, want you to pay attention—not to the colorful and comedic parts, but the dark bits! In the world of *Reincarnated as an Apple*, people are living alongside demons and monsters who eat humans, and there's a simple apple rolling around this dangerous place. The humans are trapped between dangerous creatures, and there doesn't seem to be a future for them. They're always walking alongside death!

Impossible! Okay, I know. I get it. This book isn't *that* dark, is it? Yeah, I understand. Furutsu-san often goes off on tangents and fools around, and Grida-chan sometimes goes along with it, usually breaking the fourth wall together. That's not dark at all. Those aren't near-death experiences. This isn't even a proper afterword, is it? This is just me going off on tangents again. You're right. I just noticed that myself.

Now then. It seems miraculous that these words will actually be published, so I'll actually be serious now. For realsies.

As noted in the prologue, you've now seen just a bit of the world of *Reincarnated as an Apple*. What's a ruler? What's a Nursery? What's the World Tree? Who's the owner of the voice that the goddess heard? There's a lot of mysteries and loose ends, and Furutsu-san's journey will continue.

The next destination is the city of Muruma, Berry-chan's hometown. So what awaits our protagonist? To be honest, it's pretty DARS. Please, stay tuned!

As of October 2021, *Reincarnated as an Apple*'s web version is being published on Novel Up+. I'm planning on publishing more parts as well. I know that a lot of people read my story, and as I was able to get a book published, I'm sure that I was able to expose a lot more people to the adventures of Furutsu-san and Grida-san. I truly, sincerely, cannot thank you all enough for your support.

Please continue to support this adventure of an apple and a staff.

“Let
go of
me!”

Datil was
holding back
Fresa, who
was dressed
in all black.
What are
they doing?

Reincarnated as an
APPLE:
This Forbidden Fruit Is Forever
Unblemished! **2**



Awaiting
them at the end
of the labyrinth—
the incarnation of
a giant tree that
was worshipped
as a god!



**“All right
theeen!
Let’s go,
you two!”**

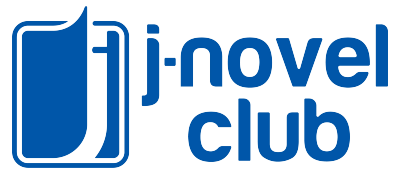
**“Heh heh, an
adventure
with you,
Furutsu! I’m
so happy!”**











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Reincarnated as an Apple: This Forbidden Fruit Is Forever Unblemished!
Volume 2

by Gato

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